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WITHOUT LOVE OR LICENCE

A Tale of South Devon

BY

HAWLEY SMART

AUTHOR OF 'BREEZIE LANGTON' 'THE MASTER OF RATHKELLY
'LONG ODDS' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

London

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WITHOUT LOVE OR LICENCE

CHAPTER XXXIII

'YOUR SISTER IS ALIVE'

THE more Sir Frederick reflects on the cruel deception that has been practised on him, the more furious he feels with the woman who had thus deceived him. His marriage had been a fatal error; he and Sarah had parted, and he had been quite prepared to make the best of things; but the rumour she had thought fit to circulate of her death had led him into a dreadful mistake. What was he to do? What would Mary think of him? Had he better write to her at once, or had

he better wait till he had ascertained beyond all doubt that his wife was alive? Nonsense; he knew that now; where she was and what she was doing might take him some time to find out, but that she was living he was quite convinced. Clearly, the best thing he could do was to tell the whole story to Mr. Kirk. This he proceeded to do forthwith, not disguising the fact that, believing Lady Hallaton to be dead, he was half engaged to another young lady.

The lawyer listened attentively. He had heard too many strange stories in his time to feel much surprised at anything.

'I quite agree with you,' he said at length, 'and have no doubt that Lady Hallaton is alive. She must have had some strong motive for putting into practice so clumsy a device for effacing herself. The whole fiction was

bound to collapse whenever anybody went down to Shillingford and made a few inquiries. I should advise your endeavouring to trace Lady Hallaton at once. The necessary inquiries you will naturally wish conducted with secrecy?'

Sir Frederick nodded. 'Do you think you'll succeed?' he asked.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. 'I can offer no opinion. The agent whom I shall at once send down to Shillingford will perhaps discover some clue which escaped you in your hasty visit. I will write to you as soon as I have anything to tell you.'

'Then there is no more to be said,' rejoined the baronet, and, having shaken hands with Mr. Kirk, he took his departure.

'Ahem!' mused the lawyer, when he found himself alone. 'I can see only one

motive for her ladyship's conduct, and that is she must have fallen in love with somebody else, and so wished to do away with her past. She was a handsome woman by all accounts, and the allowance he paid her was but moderate; while, from Sir Frederick's account, they were heartily tired of each other. I should think if Sir Frederick can trace her he would find himself a free man.'

July is drawing to a close, but Hallaton still lingered in town. He had meant as soon as August came in to run down to Exmouth for a few days, or it might be a few weeks, if Mary Lydney gave him encouragement to prolong his visit. Now he did not know what to do. He had not yet been able to steel himself into writing that letter to Mary. He soothed himself with the idea that he had best wait till he could speak more definitely;

that if that letter had to be penned it should be after he had heard from Mr. Kirk. He was in a state of feverish unrest consequent on what he was pleased to term the uncertainty of his position—we desire some one thing, and though our sober judgment tells us that there is no probability of its happening, yet there still lingers in our breasts a hope that our desire may be fulfilled. Hallaton's reason told him that his wife was still alive, and he was not blind to the fact that her discovery might entail shame upon his name. August came, and still no news from the lawyer. He went down and saw Mr. Kirk. That gentleman said he had no definite news yet, but their agent was following up a clue which he thought might lead to something tangible.

Hallaton's mind was made up. Town was

getting hot and stuffy. There was no use staying there any longer. He could not go down to Exmouth as matters now stood; he would go North, and see what York and Doncaster might do for him. He was dearly fond of racing, and those were two of the pleasantest meetings in England.

What memories do not the two great battlefields of the North call up to the genuine racing man! I am talking of the real lover of the sport, who not only bears in mind all that he has seen himself, but who is versed in all the famous traditions of the past; who, though it was not his luck to see it, knows all about the famous match on the Knavesmire, when, to the dismay of Yorkshire, the 'spots' went down before the tartan jacket of Eglinton's chivalric Earl; and who can

picture to himself how the Tykes stood aghast as Voltigeur was collared by the famous Irish outsider on the Town Moor.

Hallaton has arrived at York, and taken up his quarters at the Station Hotel for a week. He has a good many acquaintances there amongst the soldiers, and is altogether having as pleasant a time as a man so harassed as himself can expect to do. It is the last day of the meeting. As far as his speculations have gone he has not been very successful, but he is not much disturbed in that respect, when a little to his surprise he stumbles across Chives. That gentleman, indeed, as far as the military authorities permit, now rarely misses an important race meeting. As has been said before, he is fond of racing, and what with his own observation and an occasional very useful

hint from Sam Mercer, he contrives to make his amusement self-supporting.

'Well, old man,' exclaimed Dicky, 'I am very glad to see you twirling the tambourine once more. There's nothing like it, you know, in these hot summer days; and Newmarket Heath just braces you up for the coming winter.'

'Ah! and leaves you at times like the bears, to live upon sucking your paws till next spring,' rejoined Hallaton, laughing. 'Sugar-cane, to wit. But I should like to know how the deuce you manage with the powers that be to get leave for all your little outings?'

'Don't touch upon a sore subject,' returned Chives; 'they are not bad as a rule, but they are playing it rather low upon a poor orphan just now.'

'What do you mean?' said Hallaton.

'Mean, sir?' replied Chives, bombastically: 'this, that a tyrannical colonel, when he granted me three days to come here, grimly remarked that mine seemed to be the sickliest family he had ever heard of, and that for the next two or three months any of my relations who might be afflicted with ill-health would have to endure it without the consolation of my presence. Now, where does a man like that expect to go to?'

'You'll have to make hay while the sun shines, Dicky,' replied Hallaton, laughing. 'No chance to recover at Doncaster what you lose on the Knavesmire.'

'Ah, the more necessary it is that I attend closely to business now,' rejoined Chives laughingly, and without further parley he plunged into the ring. 'Halloa, Mercer!'

he exclaimed, as he suddenly encountered the bookmaker busily engaged in the exercise of his calling. 'What are you doing about this race?'

'You mean what do I think about this race, Captain Chives,' rejoined Sam, smiling; 'well, they are laying six to four on Haddington, and of course I'm fielding, but I should think he'll win easily. Better leave it alone, sir.'

Dicky followed Mercer's advice, but the bookmaker proved at fault in his predictions, for a hundred yards from home the roar of the ring proclaimed that the favourite was beaten, and that another of those supposed 'good things' had brought the army of backers to woe.

It so happened that Chives and Sam Mercer had not met since Ascot; during all

July Chives had fallen a victim to one of those long courses of instruction which, though no doubt tending to the improvement of the officer's military science, interferes sadly with his private amusements, and, therefore, Dicky had not been visible on a racecourse since the Royal Meeting. Suddenly it occurred to Chives to wonder whether Mercer and Hallaton had met since the latter's return; it was a question he had not liked to put to Sir Frederick, but he had no such scruples with regard to Sam. As soon as the tumult over the unexpected result of the Great Yorkshire Stakes had subsided, he sought out the bookmaker, and, taking advantage of the lull, asked him the question.

'Yes,' replied Sam, 'I saw him at Stockbridge, and asked him to give me five minutes' conversation. Well, Captain Chives, I don't

want to intrude upon him. I know I'm not his form, and all that sort of thing; but, damme, one has one's feelings. A man may be fond of his only sister, I suppose, and he married mine.'

'Come, Mercer, I don't quite see as yet what you've got to complain of.'

'I suppose I've not,' replied Sam, bitterly. 'I only wanted to know if the girl was well; and if he could have said she was happy besides, I should have been more than satisfied.'

'Well and happy!' exclaimed Chives; 'why, surely Hallaton told you what had happened?'

'Yes, he told me she was dead. He told me that she died of consumption almost within a year of my last seeing her. I don't believe a word of it, and there are times when I don't think he does either.'

'You are all wrong there. I am sure,' replied Chives, 'that Hallaton is firmly convinced of your sister's death.'

'And I am quite as sure she is alive,' rejoined Mercer; 'and I'll come at the truth, too, before the year's out.'

With a slight shrug of his shoulders Chives walked away. The puzzle was quite beyond him. He knew both men well, and was aware that the bookmaker was quite as straightforward as the baronet. Both were evidently firm in their convictions, and both, no doubt, thoroughly honest in their belief. Dicky felt that for the future he had best refrain from inquiries.

The day wears on, and good though the sport has been, it was unusually fertile in surprises; and as Captain Chives and Fred Hallaton drive back to York, they are bound

to confess that the meeting has been more pleasant than profitable.

'Quite sure you won't stay and dine, Dicky?' asked Fred, as they pulled up at the station. 'Sure to be no difficulty about a room at the hotel to night.'

'No; the difficulty will be with the big-wigs at Woolwich to-morrow morning,' rejoined Chives. 'Can't be done, old man. Come and see me off, won't you?'

Thus adjured, Hallaton accompanied his chum into the station. The platform was crowded; it was the 'special' for town at the conclusion of the races, and, needless to say, the sporting contingent of all grades mustered numerously. As they paced up and down the platform, exchanging recognitions with various acquaintance, they passed Sam Mercer, engaged in earnest confabulation with

one of his brethren. He gave a slight glance, and half touched his hat in acknowledgment of Chives, but took no notice whatever of Hallaton.

'Good Heavens!' exclaimed the latter, 'that was Mercer, wasn't it? I must speak to him. I haven't seen him since Stockbridge.'

'Odd you haven't come across him,' replied Dicky. 'Can't have been in the ring much, or you must have done it, because he has been there all the meeting.'

'Just so, I wasn't,' replied the baronet. 'Such betting as I did I entrusted to Watgrove.'

'That's where it is,' replied Dicky, in an aggrieved tone. 'You blessed swells who are wallowing in wealth leave these things to your commissioners, whereas we poor beggars have to struggle and perspire and fight for half a

point of odds—and when you are only my inches it's pretty tough work, mind you—and only to find that all is barrenness, and that nothing is so illusory as the pursuit of riches.'

'Shut up, Dicky!' replied Fred, sharply. 'I must speak with Mercer.'

Chives said nothing, but he thought to himself, 'If any good can come of that interview I'll simply give it all up.'

However, Hallaton's mind was quite made up. He strode down the platform, and tapping the bookmaker on the shoulder, quietly said:

'I must have a word with you.' Sam Mercer turned with no little astonishment, and courteously raising his hat, he replied:

'Certainly, Sir Frederick; I'm at your disposal till the train starts.'

'Two minutes will more than suffice for what I have got to say,' was the reply. 'I

told you at Stockbridge that my wife, your sister, was dead, and I believed it to be true at the time. I was deceived. She is not, but where she is, and what has become of her, I have not the remotest idea. Why she thought proper as far as she could contrive to give me legal information of her decease I have no idea. She and I will probably never meet again, but whenever I ascertain her address it will be quite at your disposal, Mr. Mercer.'

'Thank you, Sir Frederick. I always felt certain she was alive, and you must forgive my saying I felt real ugly towards you as being answerable for the report that she was dead. I feel sure now it was not so, and that she fooled you just as I daresay she has fooled other people.' And with a courteous salute the bookmaker hurried off to look for a seat.

Sir Frederick said good-bye to his friend

Dicky Chives, but did not think it necessary to enlighten him concerning his interview with Mercer.

As for that latter worthy, he had a strong suspicion that, if he didn't know exactly where Lady Hallaton might be at the present moment, he could at all events make a pretty good guess under what colours she was sailing.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SEEKING FOR HIDDEN TREASURE

It has been often said that men are apt to bear adversity better than they do prosperity, but this was not the case with Mr. Lydney. The bland, genial banker, with a cheery greeting and pleasant smile for every one in the days of his affluence, had degenerated into a touchy, irritable man since trouble had come upon him. He had faced the first shock of misfortune resolutely enough; but narrow means, lack of occupation, and the morbid sensitiveness which led him to shrink even from seeing staunch friends, soon told their tale. He tried the patience at times of those

who still stood loyally by him, developing a cynical vein utterly foreign to his real nature. He had been more elated than he chose to confess over Fred Hallaton's reappearance in the light of a suitor for Mary's hand. Even in former times, when Fred had only the prospect of his uncle's inheritance, the banker would have been inclined to favour his suit, providing only he had had Sir Robert's approval; but now that Fred Hallaton had come into his kingdom while he himself was a deposed monarch, he hugged the idea of this alliance to his heart. Mary would not only be handsomely provided for—and his daughter was very dear to him—but such a marriage as this, he thought, would go far to rehabilitate himself. But as the days slipped by, and Mary made no further reference to Fred Hallaton, Mr. Lydney got very uneasy. He

felt tolerably sure that she had not heard from him, as the chances were that he himself would have seen the letter, and even if he had not she would have been sure to have mentioned that she had received one. This worried him a good deal. Had anything gone wrong, or—and the banker's brow darkened as the thought shot through his brain—could young Hallaton be such a blackguard as to be playing fast and loose with his girl for the second time?

If such ideas disturbed Mr. Lydney, it may be easily conceived that Mary's mind was far from at rest; true, she had not actually promised to be Fred Hallaton's wife, but he had seemed quite content by her admission that the thing was not impossible. If he had been as earnest as he professed to be she would have received a line ere this, even at the risk

of a rebuke for writing to her; he had hinted to her that he should be shortly down at Exmouth again, and neither she nor her father had heard any more of that, and yet, considering the mischance that had happened to their first love, it was presumption on his part to feel so assured of her eventual consent. He must think that he had but to throw his handkerchief, and she was willing to drop into his arms; and Mary felt furious with herself as she thought that she had listened too readily to his overtures of reconciliation. Neither father nor daughter spoke of it to one another, but both grew exceedingly angry at the indolent manner in which Fred Hallaton seemed disposed to prosecute his wooing.

As for the culprit, he was quite aware at the bottom of his heart that he was not behaving fairly; he knew that on his return

from Shillingford he ought to have written at once to Mary Lydney, told her the misunderstanding under which he had laboured, and humbly apologised for speaking as he had done, saying that he had unexpectedly received intelligence that his wife was alive, and that till the truth or falsehood of this report was thoroughly ascertained his mouth was closed. But he could not dash the cup of happiness from his lips whilst even a chance remained; he shrank from writing a letter which might determine his fate at once for good and all—shrank from it as men do from the final confession of ruin and disgrace. Not that he could be blamed in this wise; his suit had been renewed in all honesty, but he knew also a proud girl like Mary Lydney might say she would incur no risk of further mistakes—and who could

blame her? He soothed himself with the idea that as soon as he knew anything definite he would carry such news as it might be personally to Exmouth. Yes, he should owe Mr. Lydney such explanation of his conduct, at least; while as for Mary, whether another interview should take place between them must be left to circumstances and her own wish.

The search for hidden treasure has ever had a strong attraction, and to a man of Mr. Tootell's temperament it was irresistible; the more he brooded over the fact, the more he became convinced that there were some valuables concealed in that other pair of tables. What he expected to find he would have been puzzled to say, but would probably have vaguely defined it as 'valuables.' Thinking it over, day after day, Tootell had

determined that he must have those tables; he was a careful man, and not given to throw his money about, but still he could afford to indulge his whim, and even if his quest should be unrequited there would be no great harm done. The first thing was to ascertain whether the tables were still in the banker's possession, and for this purpose he once more sought his old friend Abrams. That worthy told him he believed so. 'There is not much buying or selling goes on in my line without my being present, and I can only say I've never seen those tables put up since Mr. Lydney bought 'em.'

Tootell was rather puzzled at this. He stood in considerable awe of the banker, and was quite aware that Mr. Lydney was reported to be considerably soured by his misfortunes, and that to make him an offer

for part of his furniture might simply result in a wrathful explosion on Mr. Lydney's part. He thought it would be better to approach him through his daughter, and resolved to take the earliest opportunity of speaking to Miss Lydney on the subject. But Mr. Abrams was deterred by no such scruples. Nothing stopped him in the way of business, and as everything he possessed was for sale at a price, it never occurred to him that anybody should regard their property in a different light. It was all a mere question of money. He accordingly called upon the banker, and having contrived to get in, that explosion which Mr. Tootell so deprecated speedily took place. Mr. Lydney was furious ; he blazed out, and exclaimed that, although he might have lost a good bit of money, he was not so reduced

as to sell his chairs and tables to the first pettifogging huckster that came along, and asked Mr. Abrams how he dared to come and make such an offer to him. As for the broker, he kept his temper, muttering something about having a customer who had a weakness for such things, and then bowed himself out as quickly as he could. He had no idea of hidden treasure in connection with the tables, but was haunted by the idea that they really were more valuable than he had supposed them to be, and that even were it otherwise he could always dispose of them profitably to Tootell.

When Mary, attracted by the high tones of her father's voice, entered the room she found Mr. Lydney in a state of great excitement.

'We have fallen so low that the very

tradespeople look upon it we shall be only too glad to turn anything on the premises into money.' And then the banker told her all about Mr. Abrams' insulting offer, as he was pleased to term it, and finally abruptly inquired what had become of the tables. She told him how most of them had been sold, but that there were one or two still left in the upper rooms; but he was so excited that she did not tell him that two of them stood in her own boudoir, a room which her father seldom entered. The doctor had cautioned her always to discourage his talking over the events just preceding his mental attack, and she vainly endeavoured to change the subject; but the banker was thoroughly launched upon the theme now, and for the first time he told her of the mysterious message which had

been sent him, and which had caused him to buy up the tables at the Dragon sale in such wholesale fashion. Then he told her how he had started off to identify, as he believed, the dead man who had sent him this message as that relative who many years before had abstracted those securities from the bank, which had caused his ruin, only to find that the body was that of one whom he had never seen before, but whom the London police pronounced to be a notorious burglar of the name of Creasey. And then he went on, 'I got confused, and all became a muddle; and after I got home I recollect nothing more till I found myself in bed, very weak and ill.' 'I believe still,' he added excitedly, 'if I hadn't lost my head, just when I wanted it, I was on the track of those papers, and might have found them.'

Mary soothed him as best she could, and strove hard to change the subject, but in vain. He clung to it with a pertinacity that somewhat alarmed her; although his mind had fairly recovered itself, yet he felt the failure of the bank severely, and she could not disguise from herself that he was both mentally and physically weaker. She had been much interested in her father's narrative, but became uneasy at the way he still dwelt on the subject. However, she at last drew him to talk of other things, though it was not without a petulant complaint that 'there was no use in telling her anything, she never attended to what he said.'

In that he was very unjust to Mary. She had followed his narration with the keenest interest, and was impatient to get back to her

own room and think it all out by herself. Had she not been afraid of doing her father harm, she would gladly have questioned him further on many points, and she did firmly believe that he was right when he said that he had had the clue, although he had failed to follow it up. The whole story was strange, but surely this dying robber could never have sent her father such a message without some grounds. What object could he have had except to make restitution of property that had fallen into his hands, but which he had never been able to realise? Her father had given her to understand that the dead man was unmistakably not the perpetrator of the theft; how then had he become aware of where these papers were deposited, and why had such a singular place as a table in the ballroom of the old Dragon been selected?

There were scores of questions on these points that she would have liked to put to her father, but that was impossible. Who was that wretched relative who had abstracted these papers? In the first place, had they been stolen from him? How had he parted with them? He was probably still alive, and could he be but found might give them some clue to the discovery of the missing securities. She would have liked much to read herself that message her father had had sent him from Ditchford. But she was afraid to ask for that, though she had little doubt that it had not been destroyed. Distracted by her thoughts, she resolved to take a turn on the sea wall. The tide was coming in, and the soft summer sun as it shone down upon Star Cross and the Warren bathed the mouth of the Exe in a golden glory. It braced up her

nerves, and Mary determined resolutely that those papers should be found, her father's name cleared, and that it was her business to do it.

Hardly had she come to this resolution when she encountered Mr. Tootell. That gentleman raised his hat in his usual deprecatory fashion, and commenced by inquiring after the banker's health. Mary replied that her father was much as usual, and then, after a few incoherent remarks about the beauty of the day and the splendour of the summer generally, Mr. Tootell, after sundry 'hems' and 'haws,' notified that if Miss Lydney would not think it a liberty he was desirous of touching upon a little matter of business. He was a connoisseur of old tables, more especially those old-fashioned brass-inlaid walnut tables so much in fashion in the latter

part of the last century; Mr. Lydney had bought a number of these at the sale of the old Dragon Inn. He knew that he had disposed of some of them, for he had afterwards picked them up himself. He didn't want to be intrusive, but should Mr. Lydney have any more to dispose of, he would take it as a great favour if he might be allowed the first refusal of them.

'My father has not the slightest intention of disposing of any of his furniture at present,' replied Mary, somewhat haughtily; 'but I will bear your request in mind should we ever think of leaving Exmouth,' and with a stately inclination of her head Miss Lydney left that garrulous table collector to his own reflections.

'Singular,' she thought; 'what can it mean?—first Abrams, then Mr. Tootell. What

is there about these tables that makes these men desirous of possessing them? They can have no dream that missing securities can possibly be discovered therein, or even valuables of any description. Pretty old tables, certainly, or I'd not have kept the pair I have. As for their being worth money in the curio way, I most certainly do not believe that. Still, after my father's strange story, it's odd that two men should have been trying to buy those tables to day.' And, though better for her walk, Mary Lydney went home more puzzled than ever.

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. DICKINSON SEES HIS WAY

JOHN DICKINSON, inquiry agent, to whom Mr. Kirk had committed the tracing of Lady Hallaton, was a fair average sample of his class. If he had not that supernatural astuteness that distinguishes the detectives of Gaboriau or the heroes of Edgar Poe, he was still a very capable man, who, from constant practice in his vocation, had acquired the indispensable faculty of closely observing both what he saw and heard. The lawyer had sent him to Shillingford to start with, and he himself deemed that was the best place in which to commence his inquiries; but he very

soon came to the conclusion that there was nothing further to be learnt there; that Lady Hallaton, for some mysterious reasons of her own, had for a brief period stayed at Shillingford there was no doubt, and that during her stay there a Mrs. Melrose had died was also clear; that she returned again to Shillingford and endeavoured to prove to Sir Frederick's lawyers that she was dead was also certain; and that when she left the place the second time she had assumed the dead woman's name Mr. Dickinson had no doubt. As for why she had done it, that the detective troubled his head little about. He had seen too much of the seamy side of life, had been engaged in too many shady cases, not to be able to picture plenty of reasons for a woman being desirous, if possible, of concealing her personality. It did not require any great

intelligence to know that to find Lady Hallaton he must discover Mrs. Melrose.

John Dickinson was pretty confident of his own abilities, and after he had thought the whole thing out determined that the great question was to find out where Mrs. Hallaton went in the first instance, and that he felt sure she would endeavour to conceal; she would not dare to change her name in Shillingford, but wherever she went from thence she would be known as Mrs. Melrose. Once let him come upon her under that name and the riddle was solved; to trace her he considered would be easy. It might take some time; it was possible she might change her name again. In his experience he had met with ladies of doubtful honesty and reputation who seemed to find change of air and change of name essential to their well-being. As he

had anticipated, nobody could remember in the least where Mrs. Hallaton had gone to upon leaving. It was close upon two years since she had been there, and people did not recollect very much about her. Even the flyman, when discovered through the medium of her landlady, did not clearly remember taking her and her boxes to the station; but he certainly knew no more than that. Dickinson was puzzled; even Mrs. Hallaton's late landlady could furnish no information about her old lodger. No, she was a real lady, kept herself very much to herself. She never had a letter the whole time she was there. She was quite sure of that, because it struck her as remarkable such a handsome young woman should have no friends to write to her. She left no address on leaving, nor did she mention where she was going. She passed her

time principally in reading. She went over to Canmouth once or twice. Except that, she never went out of Shillingford. 'Canmouth? Ah, why shouldn't he try that?' He had failed to gather any tidings here; it might be he would have better luck at Canmouth. As for her not receiving any letters, Dickinson was aware that Mrs. Hallaton had her limited correspondence addressed to the Post Office; and a woman who would take that precaution was hardly likely to leave her letters about. Dickinson was off the very next day to Canmouth, and here accident put the end of the clue into his hand without his being in the first instance aware of it. He had gone into a stationer's shop to purchase some note-paper, and while he was being served he chanced to look over a small tray of photographs which was lying on the counter.

'Singularly handsome woman, sir,' said the shopman, alluding to the one his customer was holding; 'quite a romance that; it was just before I came here, but it made a great sensation in Canmouth. A young woman came here as housekeeper to Sir William Wrensley, and within two or three months he married her. Now they tell me she is a great beauty, and one of the most fashionable women in town.'

'Quite right, she is,' replied Dickinson; 'I wonder what her name was.'

'I have heard, but I forget,' replied the shopman; 'but I've no doubt there are plenty of people here who could tell you.'

Dickinson walked out of the shop, thinking it was something to have acquired a little bit of information about the fashionable Lady Wrensley. Knowledge of this kind at times

turned out useful. Still he did not in the least connect this story with Lady Hallaton. He had no photograph of her, nor had he ever seen her. So that in the first instance it did not strike him that the Canmouth romance had anything to do with the affair he had in hand. In the beginning his inquiries after Mrs. Melrose were unsuccessful. Sarah had maintained her rank of lady housekeeper jealously, and had declined to be on chatty terms with the tradespeople. Many of them indeed only knew her as Sir William's new housekeeper, and had no idea what her name was, and although everybody recollected the marriage, and all the particulars about it, the name of the bride had escaped their recollection. Even amongst our friends and acquaintances we should be often puzzled to tell the maiden names of their wives, and therefore it

was small wonder that Sarah's name should have melted out of the memories of Canmouth—although that she had been Sir William's housekeeper was indelibly impressed on them.

But when Dickinson came to put things together, it flashed across him that here, perhaps, was the elucidation of the problem. He had so far troubled himself little about what had induced Mrs. Hallaton to change her name. Now, as he thought over the whole case, it flashed across him. Here was the temptation—an ambitious woman who had quarrelled with her husband, a poor man, who had to seek his fortune in the East, had somehow discovered that the chance of marrying the well-to-do Sir William Wrensley lay within her grasp; that, under those circumstances, she would wish to destroy her

personality was easy to understand. But what did puzzle him was why she should prefer to be Lady Wrensley instead of Lady Hallaton. Surely she must have known that, poor though her husband might be, he was heir to his uncle's title and fortune; and though he was not quite certain about it, he was under the impression that Sir Frederick must have come into the title and property before his wife married Sir William Wrensley. It was absurd to suppose this news had not reached Lady Hallaton's ears; there had probably been a paragraph about it in half the London papers. The quarrel between them must have been bitter indeed that could have led Lady Hallaton to endeavour to throw the past behind her, marry another man, enter the London world, and run the extraordinary risk of exposure she was incurring. No, it

was impossible. Lady Wrensley and Lady Hallaton could not be the same woman. However, his business was to find Mrs. Melrose, and he had very far from worked out Canmouth as yet. Steadily pushing his inquiries, sometimes only to find blank denial of any such person ever having been in Canmouth, Dickinson ever and anon came across somebody who, after grave cogitation, decided that Sir William Wrensley's housekeeper must be the person he was inquiring after; she or he only knowing that Montrose, or Rosemont, or some such name, had been the name of that woman; 'what a rise it had been for her—she, who had come here as a mere housekeeper, was now a great lady in London.' These misty memories inclined Dickinson to the idea that if he could but get at somebody with definite knowledge

about Lady Wrensley in the housekeeper stage of her existence, a talk with them would amply repay him; and after sundry inquiries in various directions he was told that a Mrs. Thomson, Sir William's previous housekeeper, could perhaps tell him as much as anybody about her successor.

'She was a little sore, you see, he! he!' chuckled the grocer of whom he obtained this information, 'about being turned out. She had ruled old Miss Wrensley all her life, and she reckoned upon doing the same with Sir William pretty well as long as she lived. Looked after her pickings, too, the old woman did, and took care pretty stiff discount went into her pockets in all the dealings she had with me. Spiteful to this lady who succeeded her was no name for it—and 'pon my word, sir, I should never have been astonished

to hear she had slipped poison into her Cadbury. She'll recollect her name, never fear, and tell you all about her; yes, all about her, but from her own point of view, mind,' and the communicative grocer laid his forefinger on his nose, and indulged in a confidential wink.

'Nice old lady, sir, Mrs. Thomson, all the same—has her prejudices like the rest of us. A grasping woman in the matter of discount, no doubt. Still, after ruling the roast all your life, it ain't pleasant to be turned adrift because your cookery ain't hot enough to suit an old Indian's inside.'

Mr. Dickinson gravely thanked his informant, and proceeded without delay to inquire the address of Mrs. Thomson. As a resident in Canmouth, that took him but a short time to obtain, and then, with the feeling

of being on the right track, he set forth to see what he could get out of her.

Mrs. Thomson resided in Auckland Terrace, a row of small houses at the back of the town. Having found the number, the detective knocked at the door, and inquired of the drab of a girl who answered it whether Mrs. Thomson was at home. The answer was in the affirmative, and he was ushered into a cosy-looking parlour to await that lady's leisure. Two or three minutes and Mrs. Thomson made her appearance; a grave, gaunt woman, with iron-grey hair and keen black eyes, who seated herself with much composure, and inquired somewhat stiffly what her visitor's business might be.

'I am told,' said Dickinson, 'that you were at the head of Sir William Wrensley's household up to the time of his marriage.'

'Then you've been told wrong,' replied the lady, 'for I left him some weeks before he made a fool of himself. Perhaps you will come to the point at once, and say what it is you want.'

'I want to ask you a few questions about Lady Wrensley,' replied the detective.

'Drat it,' replied the ex-housekeeper, tartly, 'I thought you were missions, or chapels, or something or other, wanting money. They are always at me to subscribe to this, that, and the other. I wonder how much they suppose Sir William allows me.'

'My dear madam,' replied Dickinson, 'I assure you I only want a little information about Lady Wrensley.'

'The minx! It's my belief she only came there to marry Sir William. He didn't know what to be at, and was always fancying him-

self ill, and found fault with good wholesome English cooking; then he got this craze about lady-housekeepers. Ladies, indeed! I'd lady 'em. Why, the minute I'd set eyes on this Mrs. Melrose I knew what would be the end of it. A good-looking hussy like that, and sly as a fox. She queened it in rare style as soon as she got me out of the house; and as for Sir William, why she could turn him round her little finger.'

'Mrs. Melrose, that was her name, wasn't it?' said Dickinson, as soon as he could get in a word.

'Yes, Susan Melrose. I suppose she was handsome. At all events, the young men in Canmouth said she was. I never saw much in her; she was not my style.'

'You saw her married, I suppose?'

'No, I did not. They were married in

London. But I know quite as much about it as anybody in the place.'

'You didn't like Mrs. Melrose?' said the detective.

'No; why should I? She came in and took my place, and then wheedled my master into marrying her. Old fool! the idea that he could be a match for a young woman like that. Why, she was sure to marry him, and she did.'

'I daresay you've seen the photographs of Lady Wrensley about Canmouth.'

The housekeeper nodded.

'And you recognise them as pictures of Mrs. Melrose?'

'Certainly. Why, who else should they be? Haven't I been telling you all along that Mrs. Melrose and Lady Wrensley are the same woman?'

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'Ah! true,' said Dickinson, carelessly. 'I wanted a little information as to who Mrs. Melrose was.'

'What is it? What has she been doing?' asked the grim old woman, eagerly. 'Is it anything bad? I can tell you more than any one here about her. I not only knew her as Susan Melrose, but I know what her name was before that—or, at all events, what she chose to call herself.'

'Ah! What was that?' asked Dickinson somewhat eagerly in his turn.

'She had parcels addressed to her as Miss Mercer,' rejoined the housekeeper.

'Mercer,' said Dickinson slowly, for he was not aware of what had been Lady Hallaton's maiden name. But he rose, and after thanking Mrs. Thomson for the information she had given him, assured that lady, to her

intense disgust, that it was only for the purpose of proving Lady Wrensley's claim to a small legacy that had fallen to her, and then walked out of the house, pretty clear in his own mind that he had a neat case of bigamy against Lady Hallaton.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MADAM M. X. W.

So satisfied was Dickinson with the result of his inquiries that he determined to pursue them no further. Having noted down Mrs. Thomson's address, and the dates, or thereabouts, of Mrs. Melrose's first appearance at Canmouth as Sir William's housekeeper, and secondly that of her marriage—on both of which points Mrs. Thomson's memory, if not precise to a day, was pretty accurate—he departed for town, two trifling links wanting to complete his chain of evidence—the identification of Lady Wrensley's photograph with Lady Hallaton, and the knowledge of

the maiden name of Sir Frederick's wife. Both of these the baronet could of course furnish. As far as the detective went the case was complete, and, as he complacently assured himself, most satisfactory.

On arrival in town he carried his story to Mr. Kirk, and the old lawyer listened to it with no little interest. 'No more to be done, Mr. Dickinson,' he observed quietly, when the latter had finished. 'The investigation does you every credit, and I shall have the pleasure of handing you a handsome cheque for your services. For the present you will be good enough to keep your lips closed. We shall no doubt want all the evidence you have collected, but I must, of course, consult my client first. I think it's the most audacious thing I ever heard of in all my experience.'

'The extraordinary thing about it, sir,'

replied the detective, 'is that Lady Hallaton should be in utter ignorance of her husband having succeeded to the title and property—and she must have been a woman of that stamp, Mr. Kirk, as knows nothing of such weaknesses as love or passion. They crave for wealth, dress, and position. All this she virtually had, and therefore I feel sure that she could not have been aware of it, or she never would have committed herself so madly as she has done.'

'Ah!' said the lawyer, with the calm voice of a man engaged in a curious and analytical discussion, 'you have encountered this type before?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the detective; 'calculating, clever women, all of them. They never lose their heads, but they make mistakes. We all do, for the matter of that;

only when you are travelling the shady side of the law a mistake is apt to be fatal.'

'Just so,' replied Mr. Kirk; 'and when her ladyship knows we are in possession of all the facts, she will no doubt see the game is up, and give us no further trouble, but will simply accede to any terms Sir Frederick may propose. Good morning, Mr. Dickinson.'

'Can't do anything else,' replied the detective. 'Clever woman, no doubt; but she can't face a thing like this: the idea is ridiculous.' And with that Mr. Dickinson took his departure.

'Brass it out,' muttered the detective as he descended the staircase. 'Yes, it's wonderful how they will if they're brought to bay. Still, it ain't likely Sir Frederick wants to be hard on her. He wants to get rid of

her, no doubt; that's about what he wants, and he can't have much trouble about that.'

The old lawyer sat for some time thinking over the case. There could be no doubt about it, and naturally Sir Frederick would at once take steps to free himself from his wife; and about this it was impossible to avoid some publicity. The law only could sever the bonds that the Church had tied; and, now he came to think of it, Mr. Kirk wondered where the marriage ceremony had taken place between the two. He had no thought of the worthless woman, and the consequences that must ensue to her from the exposure, but he did pity the two men whom she had wronged. Sir William was, perhaps, the most to be commiserated, as it was as Lady Wrensley that the culprit had flaunted in fashionable society. Some scandal

there must be, but the less the better; and, as far as the legal proceedings necessary were concerned, they would fortunately be of the briefest.

It was the middle of September, and Sir William Wrensley was getting tired of the German baths at which they were staying, and strongly urged upon his wife the advisability of their returning to London. He longed for his clubs and the society of his old friends, and pointed out that people were drifting back to town; and, if not so full as in the season, yet there were always plenty of people in London by the beginning of October. Sarah, too, had quite recovered all her audacity, which the unexpected return of Hallaton had somewhat disturbed. She clung to the social success she had attained, and determined she would not relinquish it with-

out a struggle. She told Sir William she was feeling much better, and should be quite ready to return in another week or two; and in the meantime racked her brains as to how she was to keep her place in the London world, and yet avoid the risk of meeting her husband.

She was sitting idly one morning, pretending to read an English newspaper, but in reality turning over in her mind this perplexing question. If she could only find out what Sir Frederick was doing—what was his manner of life, where he was at this particular time; he might be shooting or fishing, in the country, in Scotland. Suddenly some four or five advertisements, headed 'Detective Offices,' 'Detective Agencies,' &c., caught her eye. The very thing she wanted. How stupid of her not to think of it before! She would

employ one of these men as soon as she got back. He would surely be able to find out whether her husband was in town, and all about his mode of life. She would know where she was then, could calculate what risk she ran, and how best to minimise it; and if, in her judgment, it should prove more than she dared run, then she must once more plead ill-health, and persuade her complacent medical adviser to order her abroad for the winter. 'Detective agency, John Dickinson; prompt, secret, and reliable; Arundel Street, Strand.' Yes, that would do. As soon as ever she got back she would call upon Mr. Dickinson, who no doubt would undertake to do what she wanted when he was informed that he would be well paid for it. From that day, to Sir William's great delight, her ladyship seemed as anxious to get home as he

was, and something like a week saw them once more established in their old house in Tyburnia.

Sarah had a natural genius for intrigue, but, as Mr. Dickinson had said, clever women of her type do make mistakes. She had made a grave mistake, in the first instance, in not seeking a little information concerning her husband before her bigamous marriage. One line to Mr. Kirk would have informed her of the change that had taken place in Sir Frederick's fortunes, and that he (Mr. Kirk) was now empowered to pay her a very handsome allowance instead of the humble pittance which had so far been her lot. She was now making another in placing herself in the hands of Mr. John Dickinson. She had written him a note on perfectly plain paper, making an appointment with him, but

she had given no address, and therefore could receive no reply to her letter. However, a little after the appointed time she sallied forth, plainly dressed, and, having walked as far as the Marble Arch, hailed a hansom, and drove quickly to her destination. On arrival in Arundel Street she was shown into a plainly furnished room, looking something like the outer chamber of a lawyer's office. There a clerk requested her to take a chair, and said Mr. Dickinson would see her in a few minutes. The lad made no attempt to ask her name, Mr. Dickinson's clients being reticent on that point for the most part. She was shortly shown into the inner sanctuary, and, though it took a good deal to surprise Mr. Dickinson, he afterwards described it to one of his intimates as 'the rummiest start ever I saw He recognised her at once. He,

of course, knew Lady Wrensley by sight, as did a great many other Londoners; and, if he had been asked the last person whom he expected to see in his office, he might have named her.

He handed her a chair. 'You wish to consult me, madam, on private business. This, as you are aware, is a secret inquiry office.'

Sarah bowed assent.

'And as, in my opinion, the value of such an office depends upon its transactions being conducted with the most implicit secrecy, I need scarcely say that that is a fundamental rule with me.'

Sarah looked at him for a moment, hesitating what to say. She did not want to disclose herself, and yet fancied that this must be the next thing required of her.

'Madam,' continued Mr. Dickinson, 'may I ask what it is you desire to inquire into? Strict secrecy, as I have already said, is the maxim of my establishment. It is quite possible that you may desire even your own name to remain a mystery to me. Let me know what you want, and that may be quite possible. I have no wish to intrude on your confidence, and if I can ascertain what you want without any knowledge of yourself, you shall be Madam X., Y., or Z. to me, if you desire it.'

'I prefer not to disclose my name,' replied Sarah. 'I wish to know where Sir Frederick Hallaton is, what are his usual habits, what are his intentions—in short, everything about him.'

'You ask a good deal, madam,' replied Mr. Dickinson, with a slightly sneering smile.

'Where Sir Frederick Hallaton is, and what his habits are, will probably not be difficult to ascertain; but what a human being's intentions may be, I tell you honestly, is beyond me to discover. To get rid of his wife, perhaps. To run away with somebody else's, perchance.'

The detective looked keenly at Lady Wrensley as he fired this last shot, but Sarah blanched not an iota.

'I wish what I tell you,' she replied imperiously. 'I was wrong; his intentions are of course beyond you, but his whereabouts and his manner of life you should be easily able to ascertain.'

'Madam is probably a relation of Sir Frederick Hallaton?' rejoined Dickinson.

'What has that to do with it?' cried Sarah fiercely. 'Who I am or what I am

matters nothing to you. Tell me where Sir Frederick Hallaton is, and what are his usual habits! Secrecy you said; secrecy it shall be! And, so far as you are concerned, I am Madam X. Do you understand me now, sir?'

'Perfectly well,' replied Mr. Dickinson, suavely. 'To ascertain what you wish to know about Sir Frederick Hallaton should not be difficult. I am, of course, presuming that he is well known about town, as the name is unfamiliar to me.'

After delivering himself of this falsehood the detective paused for a moment to see its effect. No such tortuous trade as his could be conducted with veracity, and, thoroughly aware of the pitfalls that lie in wait for the story-teller, no more practised liar than Mr. John Dickinson was perhaps extant.

'He has just returned from abroad,' replied Lady Wrensley; 'he has lately inherited his uncle's property and title, and arrived in London last July. Where he stayed I never knew, and where he is now I have no idea. But a baronet with some thousands a year is surely not difficult to find in the United Kingdom.'

'I should think not, madam. Would it be impertinent to ask from what point of view you are making this inquiry? Have you a claim to enforce? Is it a question of contested property; or'—and here Mr. Dickinson lowered his voice, and then added confidentially, 'is there another lady in the case?'

It was a perfect piece of acting. Nobody could have supposed that Mr. Dickinson was quite aware of the whole case, and could have

ascertained Sir Frederick's whereabouts in a few hours.

'It matters nothing to you, sir. I prefer to remain unknown, and that my reasons should be so also. Do what I tell you, or say it is beyond you, and I will obtain the assistance I require elsewhere.'

'I will do what you want,' replied Dickinson, 'without further comment.' It was evident to him that Lady Wrensley was accustomed to have her own way, and to carry things with a high hand.

'You will excuse me, madam; but all investigations of this nature are attended with more or less expense, and therefore I must ask you——'

'How much do you want?' interposed Sarah, impetuously. 'Will 20*l.* do to begin with?'

'Say 25*l.*,' replied the detective.

'Here it is,' she rejoined, as she took the notes from her purse. 'Remember, time is everything to me. You shall have as much more if you bring me the information within a week;' and Sarah rose to go.

'One moment, madam,' said Dickinson. 'You forget I have neither your name nor address, and I do not wish to put you to the inconvenience of calling here until I have something to tell you. As I am, therefore, unable to write to you, I must communicate with you through the columns of the Press. Will you choose your paper and initials, please?'

'Ah, I had forgotten,' exclaimed Sarah.

'Shall we say the second column of the *Times*? As soon as I've anything to tell you I will insert one line in that paper.

"M. X. W.—Please call." Will that do, madam?'

'Perfectly,' replied Sarah; and with a slight inclination of her head to the detective as he opened the door for her she passed out.

'Well, this is a game,' said Mr. Dickinson, as he threw himself back in his chair. 'I don't wonder at her getting a bit anxious about Sir Frederick's whereabouts. If she knew all, I think she would come to the conclusion that it really didn't much matter—that it was all up, and the best thing she could do would be to pack up her traps and bolt. I think in a few days I will give her the straight tip, and she can't say then that I haven't honestly earned her fifty pounds.'

People's ideas of honesty differ, and Mr. Dickinson's profession was not calculated to foster a high standard of morality. It was

not quite the first time that he had taken money from both sides, but it certainly was the only occasion in which husband and wife had retained his services against each other, although, as far as Sir Frederick was concerned, the detective had never seen him.

CHAPTER XXXVII

FACE TO FACE

SARAH, when she gained the street, turned up towards Covent Garden, intending to take a cab thence to her own house. As she reached the market she suddenly found herself face to face with her brother. Lady Wrensley—to keep her fraudulently-obtained designation—started. She most assuredly did not wish to meet Sam. She was not afraid of his betraying her, but he could be no assistance to her. Such as her game was, she must play it alone; but Sam, in his own way, was—as his friends said—'straight,' and was likely to give her a bit of his mind if he was aware of her

offending. Was he? That was just what she did not know.

'Well, my lady,' said the bookmaker, as he took her hand, 'you seem to have "shook" your relations pretty slick since you've become a swell. You needn't have been afraid of my dropping in upon you—not likely.'

'How could I, Sam? After that dreadful business of father's I did not even know where he was, and I dared not inquire.'

'What has that to do with me?' inquired her brother, roughly. 'I hav'n't welched the Government, nor done anything else I need go into hiding for. I only wish the rest of you had been as honest.'

'I had a difficult game to play,' she replied.

'Nothing like so difficult as you have now,' he interposed.

'Fred and I could not get on together; he taunted me with father's crime. My temper's hot, and we separated in a few weeks.'

'I know all that. Why didn't you write to me? Let's turn down the side aisle of the market; there's no one there, and I must have a talk with you.'

'Why should I?' replied Lady Wrensley, as she complied. 'What could you have done for me? Fred allowed me enough to live on. It wasn't likely that I should wish to attract attention while that story was going the rounds of the papers.'

'You might have wanted to hear of your father and mother.'

'I did; but it was not likely that you knew where they were.'

'Not writing to me, Sarah, was the biggest mistake you ever made,' rejoined the

bookmaker, grimly. 'I saw your husband the other day.'

Sarah's heart jumped, and she barely restrained herself from blurting out, 'Which?' How much did Sam know, and how much had he unconsciously betrayed? Recovering her composure by a strong effort, she inquired quietly, 'Where?'

'At Doncaster. I had met him before that at Stockbridge, and he told me you were dead.'

There was no doubt Sam was speaking of Sir Frederick. 'It is best so,' said Sarah, after a pause. 'We can never live together, and I want nothing from him.'

'Then how, pray, do you intend to live? A woman's fixings are not much in my line, but a rig-out like that costs a pile of dollars, I reckon.'

'That's nothing to you,' replied Sarah, imperiously. 'I have as much money as I want, and you need not be afraid of my coming to you.'

'Fool!' said Sam fiercely, as he clutched her wrist. 'Didn't I tell you that I saw your husband again at Doncaster? He don't know where you are, but he's discovered lately that you are alive. Do you suppose that your secret will remain long undiscovered? Do you think I don't know who pays for your frocks? The world thinks you Sir William Wrensley's wife. Before long it will be known you are his mistress.'

'How dare you say such things?' cried Sarah, white with rage. 'You would never bring such a charge against your sister!'

'No,' said Sam, 'it's quite enough to see one's sister go the wrong side the post, with-

out calling attention to it. But do you suppose it will be long before Sir Frederick finds you out? He behaved well. He made an honest woman of you.'

'He ruined my life. He deceived me,' she replied vehemently. 'I thought he was rich. He was a mere pauper, and was ashamed of me—I, whom the best men in London are proud to be seen with.'

'He's rich enough now; if you'd only had a little patience! He's not likely to forgive, and as soon as he knows all he'll rid himself of you.'

'I want nothing of him,' she rejoined proudly.

'No, but he'll want to regain his freedom. He may want to marry again. There was Miss Lydney, for instance, whom he was said to be sweet on till you came between them.'

'What! that pale-faced Mary Lydney,' said Sarah, fiercely, and a bitter remembrance of how jealous she had been of the banker's daughter in the old Exmouth days, when she had been in love with Fred Hallaton, as far as she was capable of caring for any one, shot through her brain. 'He shall never do that.'

'What does it matter to you who it is—and how can you prevent it?' said Sam, drily. 'Old Lydney's bust up, and Sir Frederick is not a match girls will turn up their noses at now.'

'Do you mean Lydney's bank has broke?' inquired Sarah, as a curious look came across her face.

'Yes; so Dr. Nicholl told me. There were lots of papers and securities missing which had been lodged with old Lydney for safety,

and it seems he just realised them, and went on paying interest over them for years, till at last it came out. Couldn't pay interest any longer, I reckon.'

'All I ask you is not to betray me,' rejoined Sarah, sullenly; 'and now put me into a cab.'

'I'll give you one last bit of advice,' said Sam, as he handed her into a hansom; 'be off to the Continent as soon as you can. Go before you're called on "to face the music."'

Sarah shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. She would not admit to her brother that she was at all dismayed at her position, and yet as she drove homewards she was fain to admit that it was getting desperate. It was curious, but though she had regarded an *exposé* as imminent should Sir Frederick discover she was alive, it had never occurred to

her that he would at once seek to have his marriage legally dissolved; and yet, of course, that would be the very thing he would do. She had counted on his sparing her the disgrace of a prosecution for bigamy, forgetting that would be out of his power. To obtain his own release it would be necessary to prove her bigamous marriage with Sir William Wrensley. Could not all this be done without exposure, she wondered? Things were kept out of the papers sometimes. Why not this? She was more anxious about retaining the place she had won in society than as to what might be the consequences of her crime. Then, oddly enough, ran through her bosom a furious pang of jealousy at the idea of Hallaton marrying Mary Lydney. She did not want to go back to him, although he was the one man she had had a caprice for, but she

raged at the idea of the banker's daughter queening it on the throne she had resigned. Any one but her. Sarah regretted the way she had played her cards, but it was only because she might have gratified her social vanity quite as well as Lady Hallaton, and been under no fear of legal consequences, or the being cast out into the wilderness, and not from love of Sir Frederick. On the contrary, she could do what she willed with Sir William, and from her brief experience she knew that Hallaton had a temper much akin to her own. What had she better do? and, with all her audacity, Sarah was utterly nonplussed. Why had his uncle left him that property? If he had returned in ten years' time and a poor man, the chances are he would never have troubled her. The marriage of Mrs. Hallaton would have passed out of people's minds, and

who would have cared to rake up the old story of their elopement, or ask what had become of her?

When she reached home Sarah went straight to her own boudoir, with the set purpose of determining on her future course without delay. There was no doubt about it, she ran the risk of losing everything for which she had played. Surely there must be some way of avoiding this threatened scandal. Money could do so much. Let Sir Frederick free himself from her if he would; all she would ask him was that he should spare her the appearance of the case in the newspapers. In her ignorance she actually supposed that if he would only consent this was possible. For his own sake he would probably shrink from publicity, and if in his wrath at discovering her infidelity he should wish to

avenge himself, well, then she had one card still left in her hand which might make him forego that vengeance. If her brother were right, some lost papers were mainly the cause of Mr. Lydney's ruin. She had something to tell about that. She had said that Fred Hallaton should never marry Mary Lydney. Bah! that was but the shrieking of an angry woman. He should. She would help him to do so, provided he paid her price for that assistance; and to clear the good name of his intended father-in-law must be a great object in Hallaton's eyes. He had taunted her with being the daughter of a fraudulent publican long ago. Was there much difference between her and the daughter of a fraudulent banker? An ugly sneer played round her handsome mouth as the thought struck her. There had been no publicity given to their marriage.

Why should it be necessary for its dissolution? No; let the ill-starred union be as privately set aside as it had been solemnised, and she would do her best to help Sir Frederick to recover those missing papers. Sarah's busy brain was weaving schemes upon the vaguest assumptions. She had no positive assurance, for instance, that Hallaton wished to marry Mary Lydney; neither did she nor Sam even know that he had been down to Exmouth since his return to England; but she felt the ground was crumbling beneath her feet, that the pinnacle of fashion she had attained with such splendid effrontery rocked beneath her. She bid fair to share the fate of any other jay in peacock's plumes, of any other adventuress whom exposure comes upon. She was resolute not to succumb without a struggle, and if nerve and brain could pull a woman through

such a strait Sarah had them. Those papers, now what could she recollect about them? She wished she had listened more attentively the night she overheard her father and Brent talking about them. But they spoke in low tones, and were obviously fearful that their conversation might reach other ears than their own. Had she only attached importance to it then, Sarah thought, it would have gone hard if she had not gathered as much of it as would have served her turn. Brent and her father always looked askance at her if she lingered late in the bar parlour, and showed a manifest desire to be relieved of her company; in short, more than once her father had bade her go to bed, saying Brent and he had business to talk over. Well, she knew all about that business now, but about these papers she was not so clear. Still, she'd

good reason to believe they were in the possession of either her father or Brent. If the former, she could count, she thought, on his great love for her to make them over to her in her extremity; and, if the latter, to exert his influence with Brent. Money, no doubt, would be a consideration. Well, she had it; ah, plenty, if that was all. Ever sanguine, Sarah already fancied she saw a way through her difficulties.

A clever, unscrupulous woman, but falling into the common enough error that others can be induced to regard matters from her point of view, and that what conduces to her own interests must also be to the benefit of theirs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ACTING FOR BOTH SIDES

Lady Wrensley, after her interview with Dickinson, kept a sharp eye on the second column of the *Times*. She had not long to wait. On the third morning the single line, 'M. X. W.—Please call,' met her eye, and Sarah lost no time in repairing to the detective's office. She had thought this thing out, and quite persuaded herself that, could she but see her husband, she could easily persuade him to do what she wished. Surely he would agree with her that this little episode of their lives had best be kept a secret. As Sam had pointed out to her,

Sir Frederick would be resolute to sever the link that bound them. Well, so be it; she wanted nothing from him, and would render him every assistance in her power. All she deprecated was publicity. It was all nonsense; there must be some way of dissolving marriage, where both sides were willing to do so, without advertising the fact in the newspapers. Details of that sort would be for Sir Frederick or the lawyers to take upon themselves. It would have occurred to most people that, if the thing were possible at all, it would be best left for the lawyers to manage from the outset; but Sarah laid great stress upon a personal interview with her husband. She had so queened it over men of late that she could not realise one refusing to do her bidding; then she made the additional

mistake of supposing that there must be some remnant left on his part of the love she had whistled down the wind. She recollected only the sunny moments of the early part of that idyll, and forgot the storms and tempests with which it had terminated. Did she but know it, it was just that latter part of their conjugal life that Hallaton remembered best. He did not as yet know that she had been faithless to him, but he was full of bitter regret for what he called his mad marriage, and, the mystery of her disappearance once unravelled, had no desire to see or hear of her again. But Sarah thought her persuasive powers, joined to the information she could procure him concerning those lost papers, would bring about his consent to her wishes.

On arrival at Mr. Dickinson's she was at once ushered into the detective's sanctum. He had experienced no difficulty in discovering where Sir Frederick was living, and what was his manner of life.

'Now, madam,' said Dickinson, as soon as Lady Wrensley was seated, 'I will just run over what I have discovered that I think may interest you, and, of course, will be then ready to answer any questions you may put to me. To begin with, Sir Frederick occupies rooms in Grafton Street; he dines chiefly at his clubs—principally at the Thermopolium. He is not much given to society, and is constantly away from London for a few days at a time racing, to which sport he seems strongly addicted. I can easily go somewhat closer into the details of his daily life, if you wish it, but nothing more

occurs to me just at present. If you will either question me, or give me instructions concerning any particular point you wish cleared up——'

'Exactly. Stay a moment while I think,' interposed Lady Wrensley, as she ran the detective's report rapidly over in her mind. 'Does not go much into society,' she mused. 'So much the better. Goes racing a good deal. Good again; keeps him out of town and out of my way. Racing doesn't amuse me.' 'Does he shoot?' she inquired abruptly at last.

'I don't know,' replied the detective; and then he muttered to himself, 'What an extraordinary question!'

'No, no; that's not what I mean. Does he go into the country? Does he go visiting at country houses? In short, when he

leaves London is it always to attend race meetings?'

'As far as I have learnt, yes,' said Dickinson, 'except when he runs down to Oaklands.'

'What's that?' inquired Lady Wrensley, sharply.

'Sir Frederick's seat in Kent, madam.'

'Ah! I had forgotten,' replied Sarah, who really had no knowledge of such a place. 'Listen,' she continued. 'Do you know whether he has been in Devonshire since his return to England?'

'I can't say,' replied Dickinson, 'but I daresay I could find out.'

'Do so. And now you know where this man's rooms are, you can easily ascertain at what time he is likely to be in them. Find out for me what day and at

what hour I shall be able to find him in.'

'What!' exclaimed Dickinson, for once fairly startled out of his politeness, and dumbfounded with astonishment. 'Well, of all the goes——I beg pardon, madam; I was a little surprised.'

'And may I ask, Mr. Dickinson, what there is in my order to surprise you?' retorted Lady Wrensley, with extreme *hauteur*, and speaking with great deliberation.

'Oh, nothing, nothing, madam,' replied the detective, a little confusedly. As he said afterwards, talking the thing over with some of his friends, 'You never know where to have a woman of that sort. She'd circulated a report of her death; she'd employed me to ascertain her husband's haunts and habits. She had every reason to, and, as I

thought, every intention of keeping out of his way; and, by jingo, at the last moment she proposes to walk straight into his den—the one man in the world, I supposed, she was anxious to avoid. Talk about the ducks coming to be killed after that.'

'Well, sir, are you going to do my bidding?' said Sarah, imperiously.

For a few moments Dickinson hesitated. He was not the man to throw away a chance of making money, and he felt sure that Lady Wrensley could and would pay him handsomely for his services; but if she and Sir Frederick were to meet there was an end of them—and, indeed, it struck him as probable that was already the case. Sir Frederick, as soon as he knew the truth, would be sure to put matters into the hands of his lawyers with a view to having his

marriage annulled. Having arrived at this conclusion, Mr. Dickinson determined reluctantly that his game was up, and resolved to retire gracefully from the business.

'I will do what you wish. But, excuse me—do you think it judicious, Lady Wrensley?'

'What, you know me?' cried Sarah, starting.

'I recognised you the moment you set foot in this room,' he replied. 'Men of my calling are close observers, and Lady Wrensley's photograph is in the shop windows.'

It had been very gratifying at the time, but Sarah had already discovered that it had its inconveniences. 'No matter,' she said. 'I have my reasons for wishing to see Sir Frederick Hallaton. Arrange that interview for me, and you will find that I am no niggard.'

'Lady Wrensley,' replied the detective, 'has it never occurred to you that you would be better abroad just now? I say so in all friendliness.'

She turned upon him like a hunted stag. She saw in his usually impassible face that he knew all. She was at bay, but she bated not one whit of her splendid audacity as she rejoined haughtily, 'You will take my orders, Mr. Dickinson; but I do not require your advice.'

'She's a rare plucked one,' he muttered to himself. 'Lady Wrensley—or Lady Hallaton, I should say—I know your whole history from the time you were Miss Mercer, of the old Dragon Inn.'

'We will not discuss that. You are probably misinformed. It does not signify, but you will do my bidding,' and here Sarah took

out her purse, 'and hold your tongue. Is it not so?'

'Whether I do or don't does not matter; I could tell Sir Frederick nothing he does not already know. Many thanks,' he continued, as he thrust the notes she proffered him into his waistcoat pocket. 'Don't see him, but go foreign is my advice, whether you want it or not,' and Dickinson, dropping his previous air of deference, rather brutalised his counsel.

He wished the woman no harm, but Sarah's arrogance had rather nettled him. and in his sight she was merely an adventuress on the verge of exposure, with an excellent chance of undergoing imprisonment for bigamy.

'You will do what I tell you,' replied Sarah, utterly ignoring his last remark. 'You can communicate in the same way as before.

Insert the day and the hour upon which I can depend upon finding Sir Frederick, in the *Times* for M. X. W., and I shall be sure to see it. Good morning.'

'Well,' said Mr. Dickinson, as he closed the door upon his client, 'I wonder what sort of a man Sir F. is. If he's weak there's no saying what that handsome wife of his might not induce him to do. She's a will of iron, and not a particle of heart. More than a match for most men. Mrs. Thomson was right; Sir William Wrensley was a child in her hands. Of course she married him. The puzzle about it is why she did it. In ignorance of her husband's good fortune, no doubt—and how mad she must have been when she discovered the mistake she'd made! The interview between her and Sir Frederick will be curious.'

Sarah walked away from the detective's office no whit shaken in her resolve, and by no means hopeless of carrying her point. What object could Sir Frederick have in exposing her? No, for his own sake, he would desire their legal separation without publicity as much as she did, and then she wondered whether the audacious scheme she had formed was feasible. It would cost something perhaps, but money could do anything in this world. If she only knew where those papers were—that she considered the weak point in her game just at present; but she had good grounds for supposing that she would obtain possession of them before long. Sam knew her father's address. She could rely, she thought, upon his love for herself to help her, while both he and his partner Brent were fond of money. Money again! She felt

pretty confident that those papers were to be bought. There was, however, no time to be lost; exposure was imminent if that man Dickinson were right. Sir Frederick already knew all, and she dreaded lest he should take some false step, as she euphemistically called legal proceedings, before she could see him. Her belief in herself was unbounded. That Dickinson had discovered her whole history she did not care much about. It was the business of that sort of prying people to know everything; but she was conscious that she ran daily risk of people round and about Exmouth identifying Lady Wrensley with Sarah Mercer by means of that widely circulated photograph. That Dickinson would carry his knowledge to market she had no doubt; but if he was right in saying Sir Frederick was already in possession of it,

then the man from whom she would fain have kept her guilty secret had nothing to learn. That the detective spoke the truth she did not doubt. Sam had told her that Sir Frederick knew she was alive, and if he had discovered that much it was quite probable that he had penetrated the mystery of Mrs. Melrose. On the whole, Lady Wrensley came to the conclusion they were just as well as they were. It would have been necessary in any case to carry out her scheme that Sir Frederick should be made aware of her present position. Well, he was so, and the telling of a long preliminary story was saved. They would be able to come at once to business.

As Dickinson had said, 'When you are travelling the shady side of the law mistakes are apt to prove fatal.' Utterly unscrupulous herself, Sarah could not understand scruples

in others. She flattered herself the idea that had entered her head was so much to their mutual interest that Sir Frederick could not but accede to it; and the restoration of those papers, she thought, would be a heavy bribe to dangle before his eyes, even if he should hesitate. Oddly enough, the thing that troubled Sarah most about the desperate game she was about to propose was that she should have to give up Frederick Hallaton to Mary Lydney. She did not care for him any longer herself—it may be questioned whether she ever had, or was really capable of, genuine affection for any man—but she always had been, and was still, jealous of the banker's daughter. Only she felt that it would be probably necessary to gain her ends, far from proposing to restore those papers she would have gone out of her way to destroy them if

thereby she could have hindered Hallaton's marriage with that white-faced chit, as she always designated Mary, whose delicate complexion offered a striking contrast to her own dusky brunette tints. She was conscious, though she could hardly bear to own it to herself, that she had won Fred by a *coup de main*, and that in his heart of hearts he had always loved Mary best.

Not the first man by many who has lost his head in the intoxication of a woman's smile, and paid a far heavier penalty for his mistake than has so far befallen Fred Hallaton.

CHAPTER XXXIX

MR. KIRK HAS A WARM MORNING

Mr. Kirk lost no time in communicating with Sir Frederick, telling him that Lady Hallaton had been discovered, and begging him to call at his office at once, as it was necessary that he should see him without delay. 'It is a very singular and painful story I have to tell you, and we shall need your instructions concerning it,' wrote the old lawyer; but he discreetly forebore from committing the story to paper. He knew his client was a violent-tempered man, and Mr. Kirk thought it was best that the history of Sarah's misconduct should be told by his own lips.

'I have no doubt that fellow Dickinson is right in his deductions,' he muttered musingly. 'Those men see a good deal of the seamy side of life. She was ignorant that her husband had succeeded to his uncle's title and estates. The woman is a born intriguer. She believed she'd made a matrimonial fiasco, and without the slightest hesitation she buries the past, and calls for fresh cards and a fresh deal. Ah, there's a grand simplicity about the idea, and if it was but practicable a good many of us would try the same thing; unfortunately, we cannot wipe out the past, even though our record be blameless.'

Daily expecting it though he was, Mr. Kirk's letter was nevertheless a shock to Sir Frederick. An important event in our lives is so momentous an affair to ourselves that we can never realise that the world in general

takes no note of it. Sir Frederick never imagined that his accession to fortune so soon after their marriage would not eventually come to Sarah's ears, and despite the fact that she had taken such pains to efface herself, he still vaguely thought that had she been alive she would have demanded to participate in his improved means. Mr. Kirk's letter dispelled this dream, and he had now no excuse for not instantly acquainting Mary Lydney with the fact that he was not a free man, and had been mistaken in thinking himself so. An awkward letter to have to write, and made none the easier by the writing of it having been delayed. Still, he would see Mr. Kirk first, and hear what explanation there might be of Sarah's extraordinary conduct. His astonishment knew no bounds as the old lawyer told the story of Dickinson's

discoveries, that Lady Hallaton had undoubtedly committed bigamy, and was now known to the world as the beautiful Lady Wrensley.

'Why, good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'I might have met her anywhere. I am not much of a society man, or I most likely should have done so. She's one of the fashionable ladies whose doings are always chronicled in the gossip journals.'

'Lady Hallaton would be sure to know of your arrival in England, and doubtless took good care that should not happen. I wonder, though, you never saw Lady Wrensley's photograph.'

'It is odd, but I never did. After all, the season was half over, and the print-shops never offered much attraction to me. But, Kirk, I breathe again! Hah!' he exclaimed,

springing from his chair and pacing tumultuously up and down the room, 'I am free; yes, free! By G—, man, I can cast that woman from my life and have done with her! The law will rid me of her. Do what you will, but do it at once. Break me this marriage as quickly as possible.'

'There will be no difficulty about that,' replied Mr. Kirk; 'but the law cannot be hurried. The case is perfectly clear in every link. There will be doubtless plenty of people to prove the identity, and testify that Lady Hallaton and Lady Wrensley are the same person.'

'Then the sooner they do it the better,' said Sir Frederick, hotly. 'Let the adulteress stain my name no longer!'

'Tut! tut! Sir Frederick; you forget that the lady is at present masquerading under

another name. That you should desire to be freed from her as quickly as possible is only natural; but we must show a little consideration to Sir William. Mind you, from all I can learn, he is in complete ignorance of her ladyship's antecedents. Society will fiercely resent the fraud he has unwittingly committed on it.'

'Yes,' said the baronet; 'when it finds that the woman who has been queening it over them is a bigamist, and a publican's daughter, in their mortification they will desire to rend some one or somebody. I can have no animosity against Wrensley, and no wish to make things more unpleasant for him than need be. Manage it your own way, so long as there is no delay; but remember, *before everything*, no delay.'

'I understand,' said the lawyer. 'I'll put

myself in communication with Sir William immediately, and at once take the preliminary steps for the dissolution of the marriage. Our case is so strong that Lady Hallaton is not likely ever to face it. She will probably fly to the Continent as soon as she hears of it.'

'Ah,' said Sir Frederick, as he put on his hat, 'you don't quite know Lady Hallaton. She's nerve and pertinacity enough for anything. No time to be lost, mind!' and with a friendly nod to Mr. Kirk the baronet took his departure.

'Ah,' said the old lawyer, 'for a man who made such a precious mess of it to start with, he looks like having the luck to get out of the scrape pretty easily. I wonder what Sir William will say when he gets my letter. It will be a tremendous surprise to him, no doubt.'

Impatient as Sir Frederick was to see legal proceedings commenced, he was quite aware of the measured, if majestic, tread of the law. Burning though he was to break the bonds of his ill-starred union, he knew that it would be a matter of weeks, if not months, before such proceedings began, and so thought he might as well run down to Oaklands and have a little shooting. This, of course, was speedily ascertained by Dickinson, and an advertisement in the recognised channel informed 'M. X. W.' that 'F. was out of town at present.' Anxious and determined though she was to have that interview with her husband, there was consequently no alternative for Sarah but to await his return, and this occasioned a complication in her game that would have driven most women into throwing up the cards. Sarah, however, was gifted not only with

audacity, but great fertility of invention, and avoided immediate disaster by a piece of daring mendacity. She had hoped to have seen Sir Frederick within two or three days of giving Dickinson his last orders, in which case Sir William would, she hoped, never have learnt of her previous connection with Hallaton, but Mr. Kirk was too prompt in his proceedings, and before that interview could be achieved Sir William was cited in the Divorce Court.

Mr. Kirk had pictured the surprise of the baronet upon receiving this preliminary notice of proceedings, with an application for the address of his solicitors, but he was destined to be himself astonished in a fashion he had never dreamed of. That a stormy scene between husband and wife would be the necessary consequence of the former discovering

that the woman he was so proud of was a bigamist, would be the natural inference of most people. What happened between Sarah and Sir William may be gathered from what took place between that choleric gentleman and Mr. Kirk, when, unexpectedly, Sir William called to see him.

'Seated, sir. No! I'm not quite in the temper to sit down,' fumed the baronet, in answer to Mr. Kirk's invitation to take a chair. 'I have come to see you, contrary to the advice of my own solicitors; and if they had not assured me that your name stood high in the profession, I should most assuredly have put you down as an attorney of the Dodson and Fogg pattern—that is, an unmitigated scoundrel.'

'Sir William!' exclaimed the astonished lawyer.

'As it is, you are perhaps merely the tool of one.'

'I cannot hear this language applied to my client,' said Mr. Kirk, rising. 'Your solicitors were quite right, and I must decline to hold any personal communication with you.'

'Don't talk nonsense, sir,' replied the baronet, hotly. 'I have come here to give somebody a bit of my mind; and as I can't get hold of your rascally client, you will have to hear it. Lady Wrensley fortunately is gifted with pluck, and, instead of consenting to be blackmailed by a blackguard, she wisely confessed all to her husband.'

'All!' ejaculated the lawyer, completely nonplussed by the other's tone.

'Yes, all; it was painful, of course; but it was better than having this terrible threat hanging over her. The idea that a woman's

fair fame should be at the mercy of such a pitiful cur——'

'Sir William, allow me——'

'No, sir, don't interrupt. You know the code of honour amongst *men*, not *Hallatons*. When a woman has perilled her fair fame for a man, he is bound to commit even perjury for her sake. What have you to say for a dastard who takes advantage of the power a woman's weakness has placed in his hands to trade upon it?'

'Stop, Sir William, trade upon it—blackmail. My client has made no application to you for money, I am certain.'

'Not as yet; but what other object can he have in trumping up this infamous charge? He hopes that I will compromise it.'

'How can it be compromised?' asked the lawyer, who by this time had arrived at the

conclusion that Lady Wrensley's 'all' had been a very garbled version of the real story; but that, whatever it might be, she had managed to persuade Sir William to believe it.

The baronet looked at him almost contemptuously for a minute, and then replied: 'When you undertake to do such very dirty work as this, I presume it's the etiquette of your profession to affect complete innocence of the very soiled linen you're washing.'

It was now Mr. Kirk's turn to get angry, and he exclaimed in peremptory tones, 'I will trouble you, Sir William, to leave my office.'

The baronet took no notice of the remark, but continued: 'Sir Frederick Hallaton, of course, speculates upon my paying him a considerable sum of money to withdraw this charge, and for Lady Wrensley's sake I will.'

'I decline to discuss the subject any further,'

was the rejoinder. 'There is no question whatever of money in the matter; while, as Sir Frederick's solicitor, I may state that he is very well off.'

'More innocence,' sneered the other, fiercely; 'as if a young gentleman who passed most of his time on a racecourse was not certain to be in need of money.'

'I'll hear no more,' said Mr. Kirk, firmly; 'if you don't leave my office, Sir William, I shall ring and send for a policeman.'

'But you shall hear more, sir,' cried the angry baronet. 'Tell the precious scoundrel you serve that he will be well paid to keep his mouth shut; but that I insist upon his writing a full confession of the lie he has thought fit to utter. In dealing with rascals of his kidney it is as well to hold some security for their future behaviour.'

'Will you go?' said the lawyer angrily, and placing his hand upon the bell.

'Yes! You shall hear from my solicitors, and I can only express my pity for a man condemned to earn his living in such a dirty fashion as yourself,' and with this parting shot the baronet took his departure, just as the bell rang out in sonorous reply to Mr. Kirk's hand.

'Well,' muttered that gentleman as he threw himself back in his chair, 'of all the obstinate, pig-headed, insulting old fools I ever came across, I think that's the worst. They say losing your temper is not whist. I know it's not law, and yet it's many a year since I've been so downright angry as I have been this morning. Pooh! the idea of an old solicitor losing his temper—it's too ridiculous. Sir Frederick said I didn't know Lady

Hallaton. He's right; she must be a clever woman, and stands stoutly to her guns. But what can be the meaning of it? She knows that she is found out, and that we shall have no trouble in proving her first marriage. That done, her position crumbles away at once. She cannot avoid exposure, whatever she may persuade Sir William to do. By the way, I wonder what she has persuaded him to believe. There it is; if I hadn't lost my temper I should have drawn the whole specious story from him. He thinks himself married, that's clear—and he don't believe that Hallaton is. Of course, that's it—the artful jade has denied the first marriage, and made up a pitiful tale of being betrayed and deserted, and now accuses her betrayer of endeavouring to extort money as the price of his silence concerning the guilty past.

Ingenious, but how can it serve? The truth must come out in the law courts, and a woman with half her brains would see that. Unless to gain time to levant, I cannot understand what she's driving at.'

Mr. Kirk overlooked the desperate efforts a woman will make to save her position, even when the saving her reputation is a thing past praying for. To keep the place she had attained in society, Sarah was prepared to stick at nothing.

CHAPTER XL

HUSBAND AND WIFE

Mr. Kirk had accurately guessed the distorted version of the true story which Sarah had given to her husband upon his receiving notice that proceedings were about to be taken against her in the Law Courts. Sir William, who was infatuated with his wife, was easily induced to take her part warmly. Hallaton was the conventional villain, who, having first betrayed, had then deserted his victim. She blamed herself for not having made full confession of her transgressions before her marriage, but pleaded that in her weariness and loneliness she had not courage

to reject the happiness that he offered her. It was only what she deserved—her sin had found her out. She would go away, do whatever he commanded, if only he would forgive the one deceit she had ever practised on him. She ought to have told him all this long ago; but she was only a weak woman, sick of battling with the world. Let him but forgive her, and she would go and trouble him no more. It were best so; she had abused an honest man's love, and was not fit to live.

A farrago of such fustian, accompanied by tears and sobs, did Sarah pour into Sir William's credulous ears, and the upshot was that the baronet regarded his wife as a cruelly wronged woman; while of her undoer language failed to express his opinion, albeit he had made a very tolerable endeavour to

put it in words during his interview with Mr. Kirk. Still, though Sarah had for the time imposed upon Sir William's credulity, she was painfully aware that there was not an unnecessary day to be lost about seeing her husband. His collaboration was essential in the game she contemplated playing, and it was with a sense of relief that at the end of a week she saw in the second column of the *Times*—'M. X. W.—F. returned; always at home till noon.' Lady Wrensley's determination was quickly taken. It was then ten; she would call in Grafton Street at half-past eleven. She knew that Sir William had heard from his solicitors that though they could form no opinion as to what sort of a case Mr. Kirk and his partners had against Lady Wrensley, yet they were evidently going on with it; and it was hardly to be supposed

that a gentleman of Sir Frederick's position would bring forward such a charge unless he *bonâ fide* sought relief from marriage on the grounds of the lady having deliberately committed bigamy. The baronet was staggered, but still resolutely refused to believe anything against the woman he had married. His loyalty to the handsome Jezebel who had duped him would have been touching if it had not been also foolish; but Sarah, though fully conscious of her power, knew that if the case was even talked about the truth must speedily be made manifest, and that even Sir William's eyes would be opened.

Arrived at Grafton Street, Sarah knocked and demanded to see Sir Frederick. The man hesitated for a moment, and muttered that he would see if his master was dressed. Would the lady give him her name? The

sole reply was an imperious command to show the lady up; and before the puzzled man could determine what he ought to do Sarah solved the difficulty by pushing past him and running upstairs. She knew that Sir Frederick occupied the first floor, and making a shot at the door found herself in a cosily furnished sitting-room, where, extended on a sofa near the fire in lazy enjoyment of a newspaper and cigar, was her husband. He took no notice of her entrance for a moment, supposing it to be his valet, but started to his feet as the rustle of her dress caught his ear.

'Sarah!' he ejaculated, in unfeigned astonishment, as he gazed at the handsome and richly dressed woman who stood before him. Quick as thought she noted the glance of admiration with which he paid tribute to her superb beauty. Handsome he had always

held her, but he had never recognised how handsome till now. True, he had never seen her attired as she was at present; for Sarah had neither the taste nor the money during the brief period they had passed together, nor had she acquired that veneer of fashionable society which she now possessed. Still, his pulse quickened not a beat at the sight of her. He regarded her with the admiration he might have bestowed on a picture or statue that pleased his eye.

'Will you be seated?' he said at length, and with studied coldness. 'I am curious to learn to what I owe the honour of this unexpected visit.'

She cast a glance of insolent triumph at him as she complied with his request. She had seen men steel themselves against her fascinations before now in the commencement,

only to become more completely her slaves than their weaker brethren, and she had his first glance fresh in her mind. 'I have come,' she said in low tones, 'because you once loved me. I have come because I am your wife, and need forgiveness.'

'Wife! And you dare to call yourself such still. However, as I am taking steps to relieve you of that obligation—steps you seem to have thought superfluous——'

'I have sinned, but you cannot wish to utterly ruin me. You did love me once, Frederick.'

'A love that was buried before I left England. To free you from the chains that bind us is the kindest thing I can do for you.'

'But the exposure will ruin me, and I really thought you were dead,' she rejoined, raising her handkerchief to her eyes.

A contemptuous glance of disbelief shot across Sir Frederick's face, and it was in sarcastic tones, and with a shrug of his shoulders, that he replied, 'And that after the manner of a Hindoo widow you were called upon to perform the rite of suttee and die also. I had not given you credit for such devoted attachment.'

The irony of his words stung her, and it was only by a supreme effort she succeeded in controlling her violent temper. She could not yet realise that her influence over her outraged husband was a thing of the past. If in the delirium of passion he had run away with her, no man could more speedily have come to his senses and recognised his mistake. A short love dream was theirs, and the tempestuous scenes in which their honeymoon had terminated had gone far to

changing love into hate on his part. Still Sarah would not abandon all attempt to gloss over her misconduct.

'Deserted by you,' she said slowly, and taking no heed of his gesture of dissent, 'I had no choice but to take another name. The scandal about my father was too recent and all the world knew that Mrs. Hallaton was the daughter of a man who had broken the law, and for whom the police were busily seeking. To look for employment in my own name was hopeless. I was compelled to take another; and then I thought you were gone —that I should never see you or hear your voice again,' and then Sarah sank gracefully at her husband's feet in an apparent paroxysm of tears.

He knew that she was lying, and she was quite aware that he did so. But Sarah, like

many of us, was determined to represent her sins in the most pardonable light—a woman who would have softened murder to manslaughter, and died without acknowledging her guilt, however clear the evidence against her. He was lounging with his back against the mantelpiece, and made no attempt to raise her from the abject attitude she had assumed.

'An ingenious fable,' he said at last. 'You were not left destitute or without means, while a line to my lawyers would have assured you of my being alive. Once more—What brought you here?'

She still remained at his feet, and looked such a touching picture of shame and contrition as would have moved most men had they not known what Sir Frederick did, that Sarah's histrionic powers were considerable,

and that the whole scene was a bit of acting mentally rehearsed beforehand.

'For the love you once bore me you will spare me the disgrace of going through the law courts,' she said, looking piteously up into his face.

'I intend to free myself from you at all costs,' he replied sternly. 'I would rather our domestic differences were not public property; nor do I desire to brand you as a bigamist, but there is no help for it.'

'Yes, yes, there is,' she exclaimed, springing to her feet, and speaking eagerly. 'Sir William believes he is married to me. I want nothing from you. I will never ask you for help or assistance of any kind. I will never willingly cross your path again. Grant me this last favour. Deny our marriage.'

'As if that would invalidate it,' he replied.

'Ah, but who knows where we were married? Let us only both deny it, and who is likely to ferret out the registry office where it was performed? Who can have any object in it? I will sign any paper you choose saying that I was never married to you, and that I have no claim on you whatever. Let your lawyers draw it up. Make it as binding as you like—I will sign it. No one need know but our two selves.'

'Kirk was right,' he muttered; then, raising his voice, he continued, 'You dare to think that I will endorse the stupendous lie that you have told Wrensley. Do you know that you have made him believe that the proceedings I am taking to rid myself of a worthless woman are only a

pretext to extort money? He must be mad about you indeed to think that—must deem me the meanest cur that crawls. And you—you ask me to assure him that it is so—to bear witness to my own dishonour.'

'I ask you to spare me,' she murmured, at once recognising the terrible mistake she had made in hinting that mercenary motives were the reason for what she termed her persecution.

'Spare you!' he rejoined fiercely. 'You ask me to sacrifice all men hold dear, and for what? To save the reputation of a woman who has forfeited all claim to mercy. You have put it in my power, and I shall rid myself of you at all costs.'

'I understand,' she replied defiantly. 'You want to marry that white-faced girl at Exmouth.'

'What has that to do with you?' he asked roughly.

'A good deal if it is so. She has been prudishly brought up, and might hesitate to take a divorced husband.'

'You will be good enough to leave that lady's name alone. Further conversation is useless. Nothing you can say will make any difference. The law will sunder us, and you will be free to go your own way.'

'Free!' she cried. 'Yes, and branded as an outcast from all I hold dear. Listen! You have not heard, perhaps, that old Lydney has failed—failed because years ago some securities were stolen.'

'I know all about that,' he interposed. 'You need not repeat that some old friends of mine have come to grief.'

'Yes, but you don't know where those

securities are, nor that it is possible to restore them.'

'No; as I heard it, they were lost years and years ago, and no trace of them has ever been discovered,' rejoined Sir Frederick, with evidently aroused interest.

'It is as I guessed,' thought Sarah, quick to note the impression she had made. 'Now, if no rubbish about his honour interferes, I can drive a satisfactory bargain with him.'

'What would you give to the person who placed them in your hands?' she asked, eyeing him keenly.

'I could not say without communicating with Mr. Lydney; but this rest assured—that the present possessor of those securities will get more from him than from any one else. They are worth more to him than money; to

produce them would be to vindicate his good name and justify his story.'

The flush of exultation that crossed Sarah's face told Sir Frederick he had made a slight blunder. By admitting their importance he had enhanced the value of these securities, and the price demanded for their restoration would be, of course, raised in proportion.

'You speak cautiously,' she said. 'Not as if the vindication of Mr. Lydney's good name was of much object to you, and yet it should be.'

'We had better confine ourselves to the securities,' replied Sir Frederick, coldly. 'I don't suppose I am dealing with a principal, and have no wish to ask questions. Say at once what sum is asked, and you shall have an answer in three days.'

'Money won't buy them,' she rejoined. 'Accede to my terms, and they are yours if I can get them. Money! What do I want with money? I have plenty.'

'There is no more to be said,' he exclaimed angrily. 'Life itself may be purchased on terms too degrading. I will never endorse the lie you have uttered, nor rest till I have freed myself from your shameless self.'

'Then you shall never marry Mary Lydney. She shall know that it was in your power to clear her father's name, and you refused. Do what I ask, and you shall be free. Never fear that I shall ever claim or acknowledge you as a husband. We were never married, you understand.'

He stood for a minute or two looking silently at this woman, prepared to shrink

from nothing that might save her from exposure, and wondered what fate would have been his had he been at her mercy. She watched him eagerly. She knew that unless she could purchase his connivance she would stand forth in her true character of an utterly unscrupulous adventuress. In her eyes it seemed such a little thing to forget that mistaken marriage, and go their respective ways as if it had never been. How could he hesitate? Who would ever know anything about it if they themselves ignored it? What harm could there be in an innocent lie like that should the question ever be raised?

'And you think,' said he at last, 'I'm blackguard enough to place a woman in your present position? Not quite. My future you have nothing to do with, as the law will speedily convince you. One thing more.

Go abroad while there is yet time. Bigamy, remember, entails unpleasant consequences.'

It was over; she had played her last card and lost. It was all finished now, and the fruits of two years' scheming and intriguing would vanish in a few weeks. Still, Sarah was defiant to the last.

'I give you three days to consider,' she said. 'After that it will be too late, and you will have sacrificed the good name of those whom you profess to love for a foolish punctilio,' and with a slight bend of her head Sarah swept out of the room.

'No, punctilios certainly don't trouble her,' thought Hallaton. 'She must be morally blind and destitute of any sense of honour ever to have dreamt of making such a proposal. I wonder whether she has any knowledge of the whereabouts of those securities.

I can't see how it's possible, and she is such an unmitigated liar that there is no dependence to be placed on what she says. I must have a talk with Lydney about it.'

CHAPTER XLI

SARAH LEVANTS

When she left Grafton Street, bold front as she had maintained to the last, Sarah knew that the struggle was over, that the battle had gone against her; and it behoved her to prepare for that flight which her brother, her husband, and even the detective had all counselled. A few weeks, and her fine feathers would be stripped from her, and she would be proclaimed in open court to be no longer the fashionable Lady Wrensley, one of Society's queens, but Sarah Mercer, daughter of a fraudulent publican, an adventuress, a bigamist, and a *divorcée*. She would await the

three days she had named, on the off-chance that Hallaton might relent; but she knew that it was useless—that he was burning to be rid of her. He had never loved her, and was mad to marry that white-faced girl at Exmouth. In her wrath she had threatened that wedding should never be, but in her heart she knew that she had no power to prevent it. Why had Sir Frederick ever inquired into the truth of her decease? He might not, perhaps, if it had not been for that girl down in Devonshire. Why had she been such a fool as to be photographed? Her vanity had got the better of her prudence, and now she must pay the penalty. She was learning

> What a tangled web we weave,
> When first we practise to deceive.

It would be well if all schemers and in-

triguers could lay to heart that golden aphorism of Junius before embarking on their nefarious plots: 'The language of truth is uniform and consistent; to depart from it with safety requires *memory* and *discretion*.' Indeed, to proclaim a big lie requires so much of those two qualities that it is to be wondered that so many people have the courage to utter one.

It is hard to say how these things come about, but since the days of King Midas it has been ever so; and although, as was natural, it had not yet reached Sarah's ears, already in Club-land it was whispered that there was a screw loose about the Wrensley *ménage*. Solicitors may be silent as the grave about their clients' affairs, but the initial steps of legal proceedings are necessarily known to a good many people; and the germs of what

promises to be a *cause célèbre* fructify amazingly as the toothsome scandal spreads from the Temple to Pall Mall. Rumour in the latter locality declared that there had been 'no end of a row' in Tyburnia, and that Sir William was about to commence proceedings in the Divorce Court; and the quidnuncs of St. James's were much exercised as to who was the partner of Lady Wrensley's transgression. Still, though gossip was busy with Sarah's name, yet that of her fellow-offender puzzled club smoking-rooms exceedingly. She had borne the character of a universal coquette, and the world had considered her flirtations too numerous to be compromising.

'Lady Wrensley can take care of herself,' had been the verdict of a veteran cynic in Sarah's first season. 'She would flirt with an ourang-outang to gratify her own vanity, to

wound that of one of her dear friends, or to attain her ends; but she hasn't a heart to lose, and is too much in love with Lady Wrensley to run any risk of falling in love with any one else.'

So far old Audley South had proved a true prophet, and Sarah changed her admirers almost as often as she changed her gloves. Was it not Mazarin who said, till thirty, no one sways such power as a pretty woman; and, in the insolence of her beauty, Lady Wrensley had dropped or taken up her cavaliers as whim or self-interest dictated. Her husband had apparently been indifferent to her caprices so far; but now, it seemed, some one had 'given that worthy man, Sir William, cause for much uneasiness,' and, as South said, 'Who the devil is it?' The old gossip was really quite put out at not being able to

answer this question. He piqued himself upon being always behind the scenes, and posted in all the details of the latest scandal, be it what might; and here was a very famous divorce case looming in the future, and the name of the male culprit by no means to be come at. Jocular youngsters made the veteran's life bitter to him by maliciously appealing to him for the patronymic of Lady Wrensley's lover as a fact that he was, of course, in possession of, and it was most exasperating to have to acknowledge his ignorance to these inquiring young men.

Sarah had lately noticed that her husband's face had assumed a very serious aspect. The fact was that, devoted as he was to his wife, his faith in her had been shaken. Since his interview with Mr. Kirk, his solicitors had assured him that, as far as they could judge,

the threatened action for divorce against Lady Hallaton, *alias* Wrensley, was a very *bonâ-fide* affair indeed. He had indulged in strong language, opined, after his manner, when people differed from him, that lawyers were a pack of 'adjectived' fools; but, for all that, he began to have his misgivings. His solicitors further said that, in compliance with his instructions, they had sounded the adversary to see if a compromise was feasible, but that they felt convinced that no pecuniary offer would be entertained, and that the plaintiff sought relief from his marriage and nothing more. If this was the case, then Sarah's story could hardly be correct. Hallaton would certainly not bring such an action unless he believed himself married. Add to which, inquiry had, rather to his surprise, taught Sir William that Hallaton, far from being the

needy, unprincipled man that Sarah had depicted him, bore a very good record; and that, barring he had made a very imprudent marriage a few years ago, there was nothing against him. Pursuing the inquiry further, Sir William was not long before he unearthed an old chum who recollected the story of Hallaton's fiasco.

'Remember something about it now—young fellow in the Artillery—ran away with an innkeeper's daughter down near Exeter. Father had to bolt directly afterwards for running an illicit still. Devil of a mess the young 'un made of it. His uncle, old Bob Hallaton—nice little property in Kent, you know—so mad about it, swore he'd cut him off with a shilling, and had an apoplectic fit trying to sign his name—doosid lucky thing for the young fellow. He disappeared next

to Australia or India, or some other place or other.'

'And his wife, what of her?' asked Sir William.

'I'm sure I don't know. Poor old Bob! ever come across him? Played the worst rubber of any man in London—and, by the Lord, sir, that's saying a good deal!'

As Sir William walked ruefully home he reflected that he never had known his wife's maiden name, that she seemed to have borne a good many, and that there might be more 'adjectived' fools about than lawyers.

Two out of the three days that Sarah had allowed herself were gone, and she was busy completing her preparations for flight, when a letter was put into her hand which at once convinced her that there was indeed no time to be lost. The letter was from Sam, and had

been brought by hand; indeed, the bookmaker had left it himself after ascertaining that Lady Wrensley was in. It was brief, and ran thus:—

'The enclosed cutting is from the *Exmouth Gazette*, which was sent me by Dr. Nicholl. Once more I say, *slope* before it's too late. If you want any dollars write to me.—SAM.'

Sarah glanced eagerly at the newspaper paragraph, and as she read saw that her story would be inevitably all over London before twenty-four hours were over—might indeed be in that evening's papers. She knew from her previous experience how such a paragraph as the following would run the round of the journals. It would be copied everywhere.

'Remarkable Likeness.—Many of our

readers will remember the romantic elopement of a young officer of the Artillery, some three years ago, with the daughter of a publican near Exmouth, a young lady well known for her great personal attractions. Mr. Type, the enterprising stationer in Rolle Street, amongst a consignment of fancy goods, lately had a large assortment of photographs sent him. Amongst them was one of the beautiful Lady Wrensley. Those in Exmouth who recollect Miss Mercer declare that she was the very image of the fashionable London beauty, and one of our most notable citizens, who knew Miss Mercer intimately, had quite angry words with Mr. Type for persistently maintaining that the photograph in his window was Lady Wrensley. Mr. Type is a newcomer amongst us, and therefore we would sooner accept the verdict of Mr. Tootell, and

believe that the photograph is really that of Lady Hallaton, *née* Mercer, and that the name beneath it was pencilled by mistake. If not, we can only say there are two feminine Dromios in the world at present—and an exceedingly handsome pair they are. We have excellent authority for saying that the rumour lately current of Lady Hallaton's death is without foundation.'

Sarah's brow darkened as she finished. 'That wretched old busybody, one might be sure of his making mischief. However, it matters little; as well now as a few days hence. Frederick's pig-headed obstinacy has ruined me.'

That night Sir William had to make his wife's excuses for not attending a dinner party to which they had been for some time engaged. Lady Wrensley had, unfortunately,

one of those terrible headaches to which she was subject, and he had been compelled to leave her behind. Such was the message Sarah's maid had brought him at the last moment. She had declined to see him, and begged that she might not be disturbed, adding that it was her intention to go at once to bed. In all his experience of her it was the first time that Lady Wrensley had been thus afflicted.

Sir William was in little mood for society, and if he had consulted his own inclinations would have dined by himself; but the social treadmill must be trod, whatever spirits we may be in. So Sir William went, ate, drank, and if he did not make merry, made as good a pretence of doing so as he could contrive. When he returned to his own home a little before midnight he found a note

awaiting him on his study table. He recognised his wife's handwriting, and felt at once that the impending shock had come at last, and that his wife's confession was in his hand. He was, as we know, not altogether unprepared for this, but the first line of the letter did surprise him.

'When you receive this,' she wrote, 'I shall be gone. I will not stop to be the talk of the town. I cannot face the cruel ordeal of a witness-box, nor bear the hectoring of lawyers. I have stooped to see Hallaton myself; but he is relentless; he refuses to abandon legal proceedings.' Then came several lines of high-strung penitence for having deceived him in the first instance, with a repetition of the former farrago of not having courage to dash the cup of happiness from her lips, finally winding up with a pathetic trust

that they should meet in happier times, and signing herself 'Your loving Wife.'

Convinced though she was that the game was up, yet Sarah could not bring herself to make a frank confession. She stuck to the embroidered version she had previously given, although Sir William must at once recognise the fraud of which she had been guilty. If she were not married to Sir Frederick, what had she to be afraid of? Her very flight was tacit admission of the truth of the charge, and a natural step for her to take under the circumstances. Although the servants were as yet unaware of it, inquiry speedily elicited the fact that Lady Wrensley had fled. She had announced her intention of going to bed about nine, and given strict orders that she was not to be disturbed until the morning, and had then probably let herself out of the house

while the servants were at supper. Be that as it may, there was no doubt about the fact that Lady Wrensley had disappeared.

As she had anticipated, the paragraph from the Exmouth paper was widely copied, and the cause of much comment among the clubs of Pall Mall. Audley South, indeed, was driven to the very verge of desperation by this new phase of what he angrily termed 'the Wrensley mystery.' Here she was about to appear in the Divorce Court, and now it seemed doubtful whether she was Lady Wrensley at all! Who the deuce was she? Was she Lady Hallaton, or was she Lady Wrensley? 'Is she neither, or both? 'Pon my word, it's like a double acrostic, and I give it up!' And then, to complete the old *gobe-mouches'* discomfiture, came the news that Lady Wrensley had fled the country, and

once more arose that unsolvable question: Who was the partner of her flight?

No man, perhaps, was more interested in the Wrensley case than our old friend Dicky Chives. It may seem strange that Dicky had not recognised Sarah, but it must be borne in mind that he was not a society man for one thing, and so had not met with Lady Wrensley; secondly, that though he had seen Miss Mercer, it had only been upon some two or three occasions, and he had brought away from Devonshire no very distinct remembrance of the pretty girl he had seen on Exmouth cricket ground; while, veiled as she had been that night at the railway station, Dicky would certainly not have known who it was had he not been told by the doctor; and though he had more than once seen Lady Wrensley's photograph in the

shop windows, it had merely awakened a hazy idea in his mind that he must have met her on some former occasion. Captain Chives at this present was on his way down to Oaklands, with a view to assisting in the destruction of some of Hallaton's partridges, and fortifying himself for the remainder of his journey with a comfortable lunch at the United Flags.

CHAPTER XLII

JOE MERCER REFUSES TO SPEAK

The paragraph quoted from the Exmouth paper puzzled Chives amazingly. He had believed Lady Hallaton to be dead; and yet, if there was any truth in this story, that could hardly be the case. At all events, there was little doubt that Hallaton would see the report, and surely would speak of it during his visit. 'If not,' thought Dicky, 'I will just ask him if he has seen it. Considering what a queer marriage it was, and I believe a most unhappy one, it is rather a delicate subject to touch on. Still, I think I may go that length, and then it will be for him to continue the

subject. Master Fred is not the fellow to stand much cross-questioning on a subject he don't wish to talk about; and whether she is living or not, they were on those terms that would make all reference to her painful. Now it's pointed out to me I do vaguely seem to recollect that Miss Mercer was rather like those photographs.'

Hallaton met him at the station, and as they clasped hands said, 'You'll find me all alone, Dicky, but I've got two more fellows coming to-morrow, so that we shall be just four guns and a rubber in the evening—what I call the perfection of a bachelor shooting party. I thought to-night you and I could have a long talk over old times, and to-morrow I've got to show you the house and grounds, and so on, you know. But don't think I'm playing it low on you. I've lots

of birds, and they've hardly been touched yet.'

Dicky laughed as he rejoined, 'Oh, you and I, with the assistance of a "roofer," the "Racing Calendar," and old memories, can always get through an intellectual evening. As for the little brown cusses, there'll be plenty of time to knock them about. The turnips are high, and, the Lord be praised, there have been no early frosts to speak of,' concluded Captain Chives piously.

That night in the smoking-room, when the talk had grown confidential, as it is wont to do between two old chums over the evening tobacco, Chives at length asked if Hallaton had seen 'this paragraph in the papers about himself.'

'I don't want to ask questions, old man, although I own I am fairly puzzled; but

as this thing concerns you, you certainly ought to see it, if you haven't already done so.'

Hallaton took the paper, and glanced over it. 'No,' he said, 'I missed this somehow yesterday. You may as well know at once what all the world will know shortly. There's not much marvel about the likeness, Dicky; they're the same woman. Lady Hallaton's death was a fiction. On the contrary, while I was abroad she married Wrensley. I honestly believed her dead when I told you it was the case. As it is, I trust to be a free man again as soon as the law can make me so. Now, please, we'll dismiss the subject. It's not one, as you may guess, that I care to talk upon.'

They smoked on for some minutes in silence, and then Hallaton said, 'It's an odd

thing; but, as you know, what brought old Lydney to grief was mainly the loss of a lot of securities which had been deposited with him. They were supposed to have been stolen some years ago.'

'I know the whole story,' said Chives.

'Well, I've had one interview with Lady Hallaton since my return. It wasn't exactly a peaceful one, I can tell you. She's a hot-tempered woman, and in her wrath she declared she knew where those securities were, and could recover them if she liked. Now, I'm inclined to think that she spoke the truth, but I'm equally convinced nothing would induce her to tell me anything with regard to their whereabouts; but it strikes me that her father must know also, and I think it likely that he might be induced to listen to reason if one could only get at him.'

'Nothing easier,' rejoined Chives. 'For once you've consulted the right man. I believe the old fellow to be working a betting office in Boulogne, laying fabulous prices about treble events and all that sort of thing; but Sam Mercer, the bookmaker, is rather a pal of mine. I did him a good turn some while ago at Newmarket. I and the doctor happened to chip in and save him from being robbed, and he has never forgotten it. Through him I've no doubt we could get at old Mercer.'

'That will do,' said Hallaton. 'The old man was always keen to turn a penny, and for a consideration I fancy would part with the papers if he had them, or at all events tell us what he knows about them.'

'Can but try,' said Chives; 'but, by Jove, from all I heard at the time, if anybody could

restore those papers to Lydney he'd be doing him a wonderful turn.'

Chives said no more; in his heart of hearts he did not think there was the remotest chance of anything coming of it. The securities had been lost years ago, and the sole grounds for even supposing they were still in existence was the word of an angry woman. A woman in a temper—or, for the matter of that, a man either—is reckless of speech, and likely to say a good deal more than she means or can substantiate. However, there could be no harm in his writing to Sam Mercer, and, that having been determined on, the pair separated for the night.

The bookmaker was accordingly communicated with the next day, and Hallaton awaited somewhat anxiously what the reply might be. It came in due course. Sam

replied that he of course knew all particulars of Mr. Lydney's failure, that the robbery was committed before he was born, that he knew nothing about it, and could not imagine that his father did either, but he had written to ask him. Before the termination of Chives's visit another letter was received from the bookmaker, in which he said that his father remembered the robbery perfectly, that he had seen the securities not very long ago, but they were not in his possession.

'I tell you what, old man,' said Chives, as he handed the letter across to Hallaton, 'we're not on a wild-goose chase after all.'

'No,' replied the latter; 'this pretty well confirms what I suspected, that the deeds are still in existence, and that Mr. Mercer senior knows where they are. You notice he only says they are not in his possession. Now, I

suppose, there's only one way to speak to him, and that's to ask him how much he wants to open his mouth.'

'Let's think it over a bit,' replied Chives. 'You're right, I'll lay odds. All we've got is to consider how best to get at him.'

'I've thought of all that,' said Hallaton. 'Situated as I am, I don't think it would be very politic for me to make advances. You see the old man thinks no end of his daughter. He is sure to take her part when he finds we are about to separate. When you go back, if you would see Sam Mercer on your way through town I think you might come to an arrangement with him, keeping my name well in the background.'

Chives considered for a minute or two, and then said, 'All right; I'll do the best I can; but remember, if the old man thinks a

lot of his daughter, Sam is exceedingly fond of his sister. Still, this is nothing to do with you that I can see. It's a matter of restitution to Lydney. There'll be no need to mention you in the matter, which luckily I have not done so far.'

The artilleryman's visit came to an end, and as he wished his host good-bye at the station he said:

'Thanks, old man, for a very pleasant visit, and I think we may fairly claim to have given the partridges a dusting. I'll see about your business to-morrow, and let you know as soon as I've seen Sam Mercer.'

Some two or three days afterwards Chives wrote to report the result of his embassy, and Hallaton was not a little disappointed at the result. Dicky said that he had met with no difficulty with Sam. The bookmaker

was honestly desirous to help Mr. Lydney if he could.

'The trouble,' wrote Chives, 'is with old Mr. Mercer. He makes no bones about it. The deeds are all right, and though he has not got them he knows where they are. It isn't a question of money. The old man says the secret is not his, and that he will have no more to do with it; it has cost him dear enough as it is. It's hard upon him to end his days in a foreign land, from all of which Sam Mercer says we may infer the old 'un don't take kindly to French wines and cookery. But what the deuce these papers had to do with his setting up a private distillery he can't guess.'

Hallaton had been too sanguine; it had not occurred to him that Chives would fail

in his mission, and now things were apparently at a deadlock. If Joe Mercer was not to be made to speak, then all clue was lost. He had no idea in what direction to continue his inquiries. Then he thought the sooner he went down to Exmouth the better. He had hoped to have taken those securities down with him, but as that was not to be, the sooner the unexpected discovery of Lady Hallaton and his present position was explained the better. That paragraph, too, had doubtless been seen by the Lydneys, who would probably draw the same inference that Chives had done, to wit, that his wife was still alive. What would Mary think of it? He had told her he was free, and if rumour was to be trusted he had lied; it was no time for writing now; if an explanation was to be made by letter,

it should have been done long since. No, he must go down to Exmouth himself, and tell his story in person. Another thing, too; the banker ought to be told that those securities were still in existence, and that Mercer knew of their whereabouts. It was possible that Mr. Lydney might see his way to following up the clue which Hallaton was fain to confess was beyond him. The sooner he was off the better; it could not be very long now before 'Hallaton *versus* Hallaton' figured in the papers, and it was as well the Lydneys should hear the story from his own lips before that happened.

Having put up at his old quarters at the Beacon, Hallaton speedily sallied forth to call upon the banker. He determined to ask for Mr. Lydney in the first instance, and tell him his story before asking to see

Mary. The banker received him with marked coldness. He had been not a little puzzled by that paragraph in the local paper. If he had not had Sir Frederick's assurance that his wife was dead from his own lips, he would never have supposed it; but, jealous as he had grown of his fellows' bearing towards him, prone as he was to take offence at an imaginary insult, yet on this occasion he had been far more forbearing than his daughter. He had rather pooh-poohed the paragraph altogether, said, 'if you believed all you saw in the papers you would fall into no end of mistakes'; that 'this was only a mare's-nest of that old fool Tootell's finding.' But Mary had declined to discuss the question, saying, 'We'll not talk of it, father; if Frederick made any mistake in what he told me, I must bear it as best

I can, but I'll take care that there shall be no mistakes in future.'

Mr. Lydney did not pursue the subject, for, gentle though she was, he knew his daughter could be very determined on a point like this. He listened with considerable dismay to Sir Frederick's statement. He had no doubt of the baronet's good faith; but he had so made up his mind that this newspaper report was all rubbish, it was a sore disappointment to find how much truth there was in it. Then, no man cares to see his proposed son-in-law figure in such a *cause célèbre* as Hallaton's case was likely to be.

'No, Sir Frederick,' he said, in answer to the young man's request to see Miss Lydney. 'I don't think Mary would see you if she was aware of your story; at

all events, I don't wish her to do so until this business is over. You must see yourself that it's impossible.'

'I bow to your decision,' replied the baronet; 'but this miserable business once finished with, I demand to hear my fate from Mary's own lips. Now, I've one thing more to tell you. Every one knows that your misfortunes were brought about through being robbed of a lot of valuable securities. Those securities are still existing, and their whereabouts is known to old Joe Mercer.'

'What?' exclaimed the banker, 'the man who kept the old Dragon Inn; the man whose daughter——' And here Mr. Lydney stopped abruptly, as Hallaton nodded assent. 'Good God! you don't say so?' he continued; 'to recover those would set me straight before the world. Where is

old Mercer? I know him well. He used to bank with me—indeed, he had a balance in my hands when the bank stopped payment.'

'I don't know whether you can do anything with him,' replied Sir Frederick; 'he is living at present in Boulogne. He says he knows where those missing papers are, but that it is not his secret, and he declines to say more. I hoped perhaps that this alone would give you some clue.'

'I must think—I must think,' rejoined Mr. Lydney, evidently much excited. 'Yes—yes; he ran away just about the time I was so ill. I remember I bought all his tables, but my head was so confused. Who was it told me to buy those tables? Go, go! I must talk to Mary about all this. She will know better than I do what took place. You won't leave Exmouth till you've

seen me again. Yes, yes, I must talk to Mary.'

Sir Frederick rose and took his leave, but he was so struck by Mr. Lydney's excitement that he told the servant who let him out she had better let Miss Lydney know that her father wanted her at once; and as he walked away the baronet could not refrain from thinking that Mr. Lydney was a little off his head on the subject of those papers.

'Daresay I've put my foot in it,' he muttered. 'I never ought to have alluded to the subject. Cracked on it, no doubt.'

CHAPTER XLIII

'I SHOULD SEND FOR TOOTELL'

MARY was seriously frightened at the condition in which she found her father. Since the day Mr. Abrams had called, and endeavoured to buy the tables, she had not seen him in such a state of excitement. Dr. Meadows had warned her that all allusion to the events just preceding his illness ought to be strictly avoided. She had been very careful not to recur to them herself, more especially after witnessing the results of Mr. Abrams' visit. Now it was evident that Sir Frederick must have touched upon the forbidden topics, and the effect upon Mr. Lydney

was most unfortunate. He was very agitated, and would talk about nothing but the lost securities. She had done wrong to sell those tables. Was she certain they had been thoroughly searched? If only he hadn't broken down. Then he alluded to the confession, and the pig-headed obstinacy of the chaplain, who had declined to show it to any one, but said that he should deliver it to the person to whom it was addressed, as soon as he could discover his whereabouts. This was the first that Mary had heard of the confession, and when she ventured to ask him who that person was, her father replied that the chaplain had refused to tell them even that. In vain, after a time, Mary sought to turn the conversation. It was useless; her father would talk of nothing else, and became irritable in the extreme when she endeavoured by her monosyllabic

replies to put an end to all talk between them. In the course of the afternoon, Miss Lydney sent a message to Dr. Meadows, asking him to look in; and the doctor emphatically reiterated his former orders.

It was some time, however, before Mr. Lydney could be pacified, and it was not until he had rummaged through his despatch-box, found the letter from the Ditchwood doctor, and handed it over to his daughter, that he was prevailed upon to drop the subject; but one thing he insisted upon, that he should see Sir Frederick again before he left Exmouth. Whatever had taken place between them, Mary could have no doubt it was some allusion of Hallaton's that had recalled the memories of the old trouble. Mr. Lydney in his excitement had omitted to make any mention of Joe Mercer, but had confined himself strictly

to the hiding-place of the missing papers. The whole story had a singular fascination for Mary, to say nothing of the great importance it might be. Her father had given her to understand that it would make a great pecuniary difference to them; but, far above that, it would clear his name to all the world, and convince his enemies that, though unfortunate, he had never been dishonourable. She did not know what to do. She wanted some one to advise her. If it had not been for that unfortunate paragraph, she would naturally have summoned Fred Hallaton to her side. Mr. Lydney, after the manner of a man intensely preoccupied with his own affairs, had utterly forgotten hers. He had volunteered no account of Hallaton's explanation. He would talk about nothing but the lost papers. She was still in ignorance of whether

it was true that Lady Hallaton was alive or not. What she ought to do perplexed Mary much. It was quite clear that her father would not be well enough to see Sir Frederick, while under the circumstances it was rather awkward to ask him to call upon herself. Still, he must be in possession of some information which it behoved her to know, or else what could he have said that had so thoroughly upset her father? She could not think what steps to take even now, and certainly ought not to neglect any chance of procuring further knowledge on the subject, be it ever such a scrap. Mary Lydney, indeed, had plenty to trouble her just now. She was anxious about her father's health, and equally so not to throw away a chance of solving the riddle of the securities, if that were possible. Worried by these thoughts, she went into her boudoir,

and, for the hundredth time, opened and carefully examined the two tables. No, she could see no trace of a spring, or anything to indicate that there was a secret drawer or compartment in either of them. There was only one thing for it: she must see Sir Frederick herself. She would write to him a formal note, asking him to call upon her, and give him clearly to understand that it was solely upon a matter of business. His advice obtained, and that interview over, then she must act for herself. She had never doubted that that paragraph was true all along; and had it not been, her father would surely have mentioned it. So she sat down and wrote a formal little note, in which Miss Lydney presented her compliments, and all was penned as if they had barely the pleasure of each other's acquaintance.

If Fred Hallaton was not very well pleased upon receiving this note, it would be useless to say that he was not prepared for it. He had hardly hoped to have seen Mary at all, but he quite understood that their interview was to be formal and strictly confined to business, though what that business could be puzzled him not a little. In his anxiety about his love affair with Mary Lydney, he for the time forgot the interests of her father. When the banker had said he must see him again before he left the town he imagined it would be in reference to his engagement with Mary, and now puzzled his brains as to whether Mary's deciding to see him herself was a good or an evil omen. Upon the whole he thought the former. If she were wholly inexorable she would have avoided a farewell. Lovers' mistakes so often right themselves during

these assumed final partings. He, of course, sent a line in reply, saying that he would do himself the honour, &c., of calling the next day at the hour named—in short, worded punctiliously after the manner of her own missive.

Miss Lydney received him at the time appointed in her own boudoir, and from the ceremonious, though graceful, bow with which she greeted him, Hallaton saw that he was expected to keep strictly within the prescribed limits.

'I have asked you to call, Sir Frederick, because I want to ask your advice for one thing, and, secondly, to learn from yourself what knowledge you have about a matter of the greatest importance to us. My father's health must be my excuse for troubling you. He gets so dreadfully excited on the subject

that Dr. Meadows has forbidden all conversation about it before him.'

Her tones had been somewhat unsteady at starting, but his quiet conventional manner reassured her, and they were steady enough by this.

'You are aware that our misfortunes are all owing to the loss of some securities a long while ago. Let me tell you the whole story,' and forthwith Mary commenced to relate the history of the lost papers as far as she knew it. She told him how nothing had been heard of them for years; how that the robbery was attributed to a young member of the family, but what relative she did not know, who had rooms in the bank, disappeared at the time, and had never been heard of since. Then she showed him the remarkable letter that her father had received from the Ditchwood

doctor; how, in consequence of that letter. her father at the sale at the old Dragon had bought all the tables put up, with one exception, but how, though they had been carefully searched, nothing had been found. How her father, with the germs of fever on him, had then hurried off to the bedside of, he supposed, this long-missing relative, only to find it tenanted by the dead body of a notorious burglar well known to the police. The man had died in consequence of injuries received in a railway accident, and he it was who through the doctor had sent the message concerning the whereabouts of the lost papers; the man, too, had further made a long statement which the chaplain had taken down in writing, but that gentleman said that the paper was not addressed to Mr. Lydney, and declined to communicate its contents to any

one, saying that he did not consider himself justified in doing so, and that he should only surrender the paper into the hands of the person to whom it was addressed, and who that person was he declined to say. 'Worry and travelling, when he was utterly unfitted for it, threw my father,' continued Miss Lydney, 'into a violent fever, from the effects of which he has never really recovered. He was delirious part of the time, but it was long before he was fit to attend to business; add to which the clue seemed totally lost, the tables had been vainly searched by himself, and during his illness I disposed of most of them, but I have kept those two,' and she pointed to the pair that stood in the room.

'It's a most extraordinary story,' said Hallaton, now deeply interested.

'Still more so, you will say, when you

hear what I am now going to tell you. Singularly enough, during the last few weeks, we have had two men endeavouring to purchase those tables. One was Abrams, a Jew furniture broker, who exasperated my father much by his persistence; the other one, Mr. Tootell, an inquisitive busybody, well known in the town.'

'I know him,' interposed Hallaton, briefly.

'Now, though it was curious that Mr. Abrams should wish to buy the tables, still they're all in his line; but why Mr. Tootell should be anxious to purchase them I can't conceive. Can you suggest any explanation of the mystery? Can you tell me if there is anything to be done, and what?'

'It's a most extraordinary case,' repeated Hallaton, 'and the news I've brought to Mr. Lydney makes it, if anything, still more so.

Mercer, the man who formerly kept the Dragon Inn'—and Sir Frederick winced a little as he alluded to his disreputable father-in-law—'states that the papers are in existence, and that he knows in whose possession they are, but he says it's not his secret; and nothing will induce him to say anything more.'

'It is always the same,' said Mary, with a weary sigh; 'we seem to be on the verge of finding them, and then seem further off their discovery than ever.'

'Let me think for a few minutes,' said Hallaton, as Mary paused. 'Let us see: as far as the evidence goes it amounts to this—the burglar's message told Mr. Lydney that the securities were in a table at the Dragon; the landlord of that inn declares that he has seen them and knows where they are. Now,

if they were in a table drawer they must have been discovered at the time of the sale; you know how people pull furniture about and look it over at an auction. It is not likely that all the drawers were not pulled out and looked into half a dozen times by possible buyers; therefore, supposing Mr. Creasy and Mercer both to have been correct in their statements, the papers must have been removed when the latter fled from the old inn.'

'Then what do you advise?' asked Miss Lydney. 'It seems that unless Mr. Mercer chooses to speak we can do nothing.'

During all this time Sir Frederick had been regarding the tables with considerable interest. He now rose from his chair, and walking across examined both tables carefully. Then, turning round, he said quietly, 'I should send for Tootell.'

'Mr. Tootell!' cried Mary, in astonishment.

'Yes,' replied Hallaton, 'I think that is the first thing to be done. It is possible that there may be some secret drawers to these tables, which have escaped your scrutiny—at all events, it would be something to ascertain why Mr. Tootell is so anxious to become their possessor; though an inquisitive bore, he's a good-natured old fellow at bottom.'

Now, although this might be good advice, Mary Lydney was conscious that it was calculated to become a little embarrassing. Some short time must elapse before a servant could return either with Mr. Tootell or without him, and this interval Mary felt would be particularly awkward. What were they to talk about? The last time they had met they had been as good as pledged to one another,

and now they must talk platitudes. However, Mary determined to brave it, and rang the bell to give instructions that Mr. Tootell should be if possible found, and brought there as quickly as might be.

A dead silence came between them after the servant's departure. Mary got so nervous at the awkwardness of the situation that she felt that she could bear it no longer, and muttering something about going to look after her father, 'requested Sir Frederick to excuse her.' He rose to open the door for her, but pausing for one moment with his hand on the lock, said, 'Miss Lydney, I have no right to speak to you now, and can only implore you to believe that I was in complete ignorance of all the circumstances when we last met, and that what I ventured then to say was spoken in all honesty and sincerity.'

She made no reply, but as she passed through the door gave him a glance which showed that, though they might never be more to each other than they were then, she believed that he had sinned against her unwittingly.

Nearly half an hour elapsed before Mr. Tootell made his appearance, during which time Hallaton occupied himself in measuring the tables with his walking-stick in various ways, and in tapping them with his knuckles, to see if he could discover any traces of concealed drawers, and was so engaged when Tootell entered the room.

He started when he saw what Hallaton was doing. Unintentionally the baronet had hit upon the very best way of opening the business. Mr. Tootell had made a pretty fair guess as to why he had been sent for,

and directly he saw what Sir Frederick was about, he knew that he, at all events, suspected the existence of a secret drawer, and under these circumstances it was not likely that the tables would be parted with till the mystery was cleared up.

'Miss Lydney has sent for you to know if you can explain to her the trick of these tables,' said Hallaton. 'It is quite evident that they contain some secret compartment, of which she is ignorant. I can hardly say why—chiefly because you were an old friend of Mr. Mercer's, I think—but it struck me you might understand them.'

'No, no,' was the reply. 'Old Joe never told me nothing. He treated me very badly at last, as you may remember, Sir Frederick.'

'The thing lies in a nutshell,' was the cool reply. 'If you can't help us, or won't help

us, I shall recommend Miss Lydney to send for the nearest carpenter, and have these tables broken up under her own eyes.'

For two or three minutes Tootell remained silent, during which pause Mary re-entered the room. Rapidly running matters over in his own mind, Tootell saw at once that whatever discovery was to be made would now inevitably take place. His curiosity impelled him to be present at it. He therefore replied :

'I shall be very glad to give any help I can. May I look at the tables?'

'Certainly,' said Mary.

After examining the brass inlaid pattern attentively for a little, Tootell observed :

'These are not quite the same pattern, but they are very like a pair that I bought not long ago, and which originally belonged to the old Dragon ball-room. I fancy the trick

is the same. 'You see,' he continued oracularly, 'that whereas on this table the brass scroll-work is all the same pattern, in the other it differs slightly, and if you will observe closely you will see that this boss, instead of being quite round like the others, is of a slightly oval shape. Pull the drawer quite out, press the boss I pointed out, and you will find the front of a small compartment behind the drawer fall down.'

It was difficult to say which of the three was most excited. Quick as thought Mary pulled out the drawer, Tootell pressed the spring, and the baronet, putting in his hand, cried out:

'He's right! There's a cavity here, just such a place as would be used to deposit important papers.'

Mary held her breath and gazed anxiously

at Sir Frederick. Suddenly his face fell, and in tones of deep disappointment he exclaimed, 'There's nothing whatever in it.'

'Exactly the same in my case!' cried Tootell.

'You also found nothing, Mr. Tootell?' said Mary. 'Where did you get them?'

'I bought them of Abrams, the dealer,' was the brief reply, 'and a precious lot he made me pay for them,' and then, well-nigh as crestfallen as his companions, Mr. Tootell declared investigation of the other table useless, and took his departure.

CHAPTER XLIV

BRENT'S STORY

'A GREAT disappointment, no doubt, Miss Lydney,' said Sir Frederick; 'but bear in mind that, though Mercer said he knew where the papers where, he never hinted they were in those tables, nor gave any reason to suppose that they were at the old Dragon at all. We know that these securities exist, and all we can say is they *must* be found.'

'You have been very kind, Sir Frederick,' said the young lady, with a bow of dismissal, 'but there is no more to be done except say good-bye,' and after a moment's hesitation she extended her hand.

Hallaton took it, and if he pressed it a little more closely than the terms of their compact quite warranted it was hardly to be wondered.

Mary's face flushed slightly, but she did not trust herself with further speech, and Hallaton rather sadly left the room.

He told himself as he walked away it was only what he expected, but that was not quite the truth. He had hoped that Mary would have shown a little more warmth in her manner, and not adhered so rigidly to the line of conduct she had laid down; while she, poor girl, was even then blaming herself for having shaken hands with him.

'There's nothing more to be done here,' said Sir Frederick to himself. 'I'll go up to London by the next train, catch hold of Chives, and through him see if Sam Mercer

can't be induced to worm this secret out of his father.'

It is an idle time with Sam Mercer. The racing of the year is over, and the dead season of the turf has commenced. In these days of post-betting there is little for the bookmakers to do during the recess, and an energetic, pushing man like Sam often grumbles at the enforced lull in his labours, and wishes he had lived in the good old times when speculation on the Derby went on all the winter. Sam Mercer, sitting in his comfortable lodgings in Bloomsbury, is lost in thought, and, after his manner when giving anything his grave consideration, is smoking furiously.

'It fairly beats me,' said the bookmaker to himself, 'what on earth he can want to see me about. Of course I recollect Brent, and used

to see him now and again at the Dragon when I went down to look at the old folks, and always wondered what in the name of common sense he was doing there. However, all that was explained when what the old 'un took the inn for came out. The poor beggar says he's ill, and I daresay is hard up. Wants to borrow a few dollars, I reckon. Well, I'll go and see him, anyhow. Not much of weather this for invalids,' continued Sam, as he gazed out at the gloomy November day.

Having enveloped himself in an ulster, Sam lit a fresh cigar, just, as he said, to keep the fog out, and strode manfully away to the address given him at Islington. Brent's abode gave no indication of the poverty which the bookmaker had anticipated. On the contrary, if not palatially, Mr. Brent was very comfortably housed. The neat maid-servant

who opened the door informed Sam that her master was at home, and, without further demur, ushered him into a well-furnished room on the first-floor, where stretched on a luxurious-looking sofa was the man he sought. Nothing about the room that gave the idea of poverty or want; on the contrary, it was just such a cosy den as a well-to-do bachelor would be likely to inhabit.

'Very kind of you to come, Mercer,' said the invalid, half raising himself from the couch. 'You will excuse my getting up to talk to you; but I really am ill, and the slightest exertion seems to bring the confounded cough on.'

'Well, you don't look very chipper,' replied the bookmaker. 'It's no use fooling you on that point; you'll have to lie by and take care of yourself this winter. I'm sorry

to find you so ill. If there's anything I can do for you I'll do it, but I'm not going to find any money for such games as you and the old 'un carried on at the Dragon.'

'No fear,' said the other; 'this is my own house, and I've plenty of coin to last my time. I'm a dying man, and shall never last the winter through.'

'Nonsense,' replied Sam, cheerily, 'you'll not "hand in your checks" for many a year yet.'

'We won't argue about it,' replied the other, wearily; 'a man in a galloping consumption who expects to pull through is a fool. However, I've got one or two things to put straight before I go, and I want you to help me. First of all, do you know who I am?'

'Well,' said Sam, 'if your name is not Brent, I certainly don't.'

'I have gone under that name and many others since I lost my own thirty years ago. I am Richard Lydney, a brother of the banker at Exmouth.'

'Never heard of you; never knew he had one.'

'It was before you can remember, no doubt; but do you mean to say that you never heard of the robbery at Lydney's Bank?'

'Only in this way,' replied the bookmaker; 'when your brother was knocked out last year I did see in the papers that the abstraction of a lot of securities some time before was supposed to be the cause of his embarrassment. I suppose it was you that took them?—and all I can say is, if you did, you played it pretty low on your brother.'

'I did not take them,' rejoined Brent, or, to give him his right name, Richard Lydney;

'but I got the credit of doing so, and should have found it impossible to prove my innocence if I had been taken.'

'Well,' said Sam, 'I don't see what's to be gained by your proving your innocence at this time of day; an unpleasant thing for the family to have this old scandal revived.'

'But I can't prove my innocence,' said Richard, slowly.

'Then,' rejoined Mercer, 'I can't see any cause for you to open your mouth.'

'Yes, there is,' replied the sick man, dropping his voice almost to an eager whisper. 'I've got the securities.'

'No! Have you, though? Then there's a chance of putting everything all straight again. There's a particular friend of mine, Captain Chives, is just raising Cain about those securities. The only thing beats me is

why the dickens you didn't hand them over to your brother long ago. They say down in the old country that he'd have settled all right enough if he had only had those documents.'

'Because, man, I hadn't got them; it wasn't for years afterwards I came to know the man who took them, and I only found them in the drawer of a table in the old ballroom about a fortnight before the smash came at the Dragon. I didn't know how hardly pressed my brother was; still I meant to restore them before I left; but, thanks to that blundering fool Tootell, as you know, we had to clear out at short notice, and all I could do was to bring the papers along with me. How they got into that table in the old ballroom I haven't the faintest idea. I found them by the veriest accident. I was

looking for an odd scrap of paper to light a pipe.'

'Still,' said Sam, 'you must have seen your brother's trouble in the papers—surely seen that his dollar-shop had got the shutters up.'

'Not until it was too late to be of any good. In the first place the hue-and-cry after us was pretty hot, and I was too busy taking care of myself to give those papers a thought.'

'Well, if you like to entrust those papers to me, I'll see they get into Mr. Lydney's hands all right. I should like to ask you one question: if you didn't commit that robbery, what made you run away from Exmouth?'

'Well,' replied Richard Lydney, 'that's a long story. I was a young fellow, and a clerk in the bank at that time—a mere boy. I had rooms at the bank, and slept

there. No wonder I fell into the follies of youth. I was in debt, and, worse still, I was entangled with a young woman. Polly Windsor was your mother's youngest sister—a very good-looking, imperious girl, about five years older than myself. It was her whim to do pretty much the same as her niece did years afterwards. She wanted to marry a gentleman. She was a good bit older, and her will much stronger than mine, and I verily believe she'd have carried her point if I hadn't fled. She's dead and gone now, poor thing; but when she set her mind upon a thing, she was very hard to say no to. I let myself out of the bank in the early morning, and in my anxiety not to disturb the porter, who slept on the ground-floor, I left the front door ajar. Two or three days afterwards I saw the account of the robbery in the papers, with the

addenda :—" We regret to say that one of the family has absconded, which, sad to say, indicates his being probably concerned in it." What was I to do? It was useless for me to return and assert my innocence. I could give no explanation whatever of the robbery. I could not well explain why I had bolted from Exmouth, and I had excellent reasons for not wishing to return to it. I kept silence, and have been consequently branded as the perpetrator of the bank robbery ever since.'

'Now, I should like to ask you one other question. What on earth possessed you to let the governor in for a speculation like that?'

'He never made so much money in a short time in his life,' exclaimed Richard, vehemently. 'That old Dragon Inn was just made to work a plant of that kind in, and if

it hadn't been for that idiot Tootell we should have made our fortunes, and run no risk whatever. I've been at it all my life, you see, and made a deal of money at the game.'

'Been at it all your life?' said the bookmaker. 'Mean to say you've been a scientific smuggler of the new school all your time?'

Lydney nodded assent. 'You see, the way of it was this. When I came to town I had to earn a living. The only thing I was fit for was a clerkship, and pretty hard work I had to find that. At last I was taken in on trial in a big distillery, in the bookkeeping department, and I did so well that I was taken on permanently. The whole process of distillation interested me extremely, and, though I had nothing to do with that part of the business, I spent a good deal of my spare time watching the men at their work, and by degrees got to

understand the somewhat complicated operation tolerably well. An unexpected vacancy occurring amongst the overseers in the practical part of the establishment, I begged to be transferred to it from the office, and, after some little hesitation on the part of my employers, obtained it. I hated the drudgery of the office stool, but liked my new work excessively, and very soon became proficient in it. Then came the old story. Bah! you can guess it without my telling you. A young fellow about London, I got into bad company. We all know what that means. Festive hours, quickly followed by debt, difficulties, and hours very much the other way on. I became so irregular in my attendance at business that after one or two sharp reprimands I got the sack. Now, amongst the men employed under me in the distillery was

a man a good bit older than myself, and a first-rate hand; so clever a man at his work that I often wondered he wasn't holding a higher position. However, I soon learnt that, though there was nothing against him, he had the reputation of being so uncommon shifty that his employers dared not trust him in any post of responsibility. "A first-class hand, but, bless your soul," said one of my brother superintendents, "that chap would levy a heavy toll on every vat if he had the chance." Of course, this fellow knew I'd been kicked out of the firm, and, though it never struck me at the time, must have been keeping a sharp eye on me for some weeks past. Well, his chance had come now. If I had been in difficulties beforehand, you may be sure being kicked out of a situation wasn't likely to mend matters.'

'Not much,' remarked Sam.

'No,' rejoined Lydney; 'but this fellow I've been speaking of quickly found me out, and showed me how I could make a good bit of money without any risk to speak of, if I didn't mind going in for a little free trading. Then he explained to me how for some little time he had been doing a little illicit distillation on his own account, and said, "I've made a tidy bit of money at it, considering the very small scale upon which I've been able to work it. You see, I'm at the distillery most of my time, and you know when the thing is on the run it wants watching night and day, and the one or two pals I've got in it with me are a long way off first-class hands. Now you are, Brent, and if you'll come in with me we'll extend the business, and as soon as I've got a little more capital I'll chuck the

old shop, and we'll go in for it on a big scale."

'The bargain was struck; for years he and I worked together, and in spite of being perpetually chivied by the revenue officers, and often having to abandon all our plant, still we made a good bit of money, and were never caught. However, three years ago he died, and I made up my mind to retire from business, when I thought I would take a run down to Exmouth, and look at the old place once more. There was no chance of any one recognising me after all those years, and the only people I made myself known to during the time I stayed were the Mercers. I wanted to hear as much as I could about my own family, you see. Now, while I was there the old Dragon Inn was advertised to let, and, I need scarcely add, as a boy I'd known the

house well. Mercer told me it had been shut up as an inn for years. Suddenly the thought flashed across me—what a magnificent place it would be in which to establish a private distillery on a good-sized scale! I knew all the old legends about the vaults beneath the ball-room, and so on. I would persuade Joe to join me, and, in the old smuggling phrase, "run one last cargo." The re-opening of the old inn would, I felt sure, attract no custom, and be a capital blind to our real calling. Your father assented, took the inn, and you know the rest.'

'It's a monstrous queer story,' said the bookmaker. 'I reckon you did pretty well over that last cargo?'

'We did, and a few months more we should have finished, and the old Dragon would have been in the market again. And

now, Mr. Mercer, you must go. I can't talk any more, and must try and get some sleep.'

'And about those securities?'

'They're all safe. Come and see me again about them; but remember, I'll not hand them over to either Captain Chives or any of your family. There, I can't talk any more, but I've good reasons of my own for what I say. I'll give them up only to my brother or his daughter. Now, please, give me a little of that brandy-and-water. Thanks,' he continued, as he took the tumbler from Mercer's hand. 'Once more, good-bye. Come and see me again in a day or two's time.'

The bookmaker pressed his hand, and then quietly descending the stairs, let himself out into the street.

'It's a queer story,' muttered Sam to himself. 'I wonder why he should mistrust all

of us; and how the devil did those papers get into a table-drawer in the old ball-room? Who put 'em there? and why did he do it?' And this problem puzzled Sam Mercer all his homeward way.

CHAPTER XLV

A DEATH-BED SUMMONS

THE day after his arrival in town Hallaton was thrown into a state of great excitement by the arrival of Chives in breathless haste.

'Hurrah! Fred,' he cried, 'it's all right. I've just received a letter from Sam Mercer to say the securities are all safe. He had a long talk yesterday with the man who has them, and is to see him again in a day or two, when I'm to hear from him again; but the fellow who has them says he'll only give them up to either Mr. or Miss Lydney in person, and Sam says that he thinks he means sticking to

that. However, that won't much matter so long as they get them.'

'No,' replied the other; 'that is the main point.'

'Why, it's the only point I should think,' replied Chives.

'Yes, of course it is,' replied Fred, hastily; but for all that he could not help thinking how he should have liked to have given those papers to Mary Lydney with his own hand.

'Well, it's a comfort to know it's all right,' said Chives; 'there's nothing more to be done but wait patiently till we hear again from Sam, and then I suppose Mr. Lydney will have to come up about it. There, that's all I have to say. I see you're busy at your writing-table. Property has its obligations, we are told, and I suppose an extensive correspondence is one of them. I'm only

sorry I don't see any prospect of my being troubled in that way at present. Come and lunch with me at the "Flags";' and then the light-hearted artilleryman darted down stairs and jumped into the hansom he had in waiting.

The next morning's post brought Mary Lydney a letter which apprised her that the possessor of the securities was discovered, and that he professed himself perfectly willing to surrender them, but only into the hands of Mr. or Miss Lydney. The missive was couched in perfectly business terms, concluding with an inquiry as to whether Mr. Lydney would be well enough to travel up to town within the course of a week. That the holder of the papers was the long-lost Richard Lydney, Hallaton was not aware, for Mercer had thought it more judicious to

keep that part of the matter to himself. On thinking over it, the bookmaker had seen no necessity for disclosing that fact. Indeed, until he had again seen the *soi-disant* Brent, he did not know whether he would wish it, and decided to keep his own lips closed on the subject.

The news plunged Mary into a state of feverish excitement. The idea of clearing her father's name she had begun to think was a hope never likely to be accomplished. When that momentary prospect of success had been dissipated by the failure to find the securities in the table, she slowly arrived at the conclusion that, though old Mercer had spoken in good faith, yet his knowledge had come too late. She looked upon it that they perhaps had been there, but had been removed, in all probability previous to the sale

at the Dragon. However, one thing was clear: it was no use mentioning it to her father at present, and, in her own opinion, when the time came it would be utterly impossible for him to proceed to London on such an errand. That must be for Dr. Meadows to decide, and it would be time enough to ask his opinion when she heard again.

Sam Mercer only allowed two days to intervene before he once more wended his way out to Islington. He found Richard Lydney decidedly weaker than when he had last seen him; in fact, there could be no doubt that the man was in the last stage of a galloping consumption, and, though its victims sometimes linger for months, yet the bookmaker did not think it would be so in this case. Lydney was very pleased to see

his visitor, and assured him, in reply to his inquiries, that he had everything he wanted, most attentive servants, and the best of medical advice.

'But that last is all bosh,' he added. 'All the doctors in London couldn't save me. I've had a rickety chest for a long time, and what between the worry of the cough and this terrible feeling of weakness, I shall not be sorry when it's all over. I told you the other day I would give you my reasons for not handing those securities to any one except my own people. I believe you to be straight, although I don't know much about you; but blood's thicker than water, and you're a Mercer. Now, your father was devoted to your sister, and it's only fair to suppose that you are the same. I had the opportunity of knowing Miss Mercer well, and you must

excuse my saying that she had an iron will and a violent temper.'

'Yes, Sarah liked to carry things with a high hand, and was apt to get wrathy if she didn't get her own way,' assented Sam.

'If there was one woman Miss Mercer hated it was Mary Lydney, and Miss Mercer was a good hater. If there was one woman she was madly jealous of, it was my niece. I know she didn't get on well with her husband; and she was just the sort of woman who, under those circumstances, would nurse her jealousy for a lifetime—I have heard nothing about her for a long while. I don't know where she is; but as I see by to-day's papers "Hallaton *versus* Hallaton" is down for hearing in the Divorce Court, I can fancy Lady Hallaton still cherishing the bitterest animosity towards Mary; and that, had she

the opportunity, those securities would never reach my brother's hands.'

'Well, Mr. Lydney,' said Sam Mercer, 'I can only say you know more than I do. What a jealous woman will do there's no telling. I can only say, if you had trusted me, I should have handed the papers over to Mr. Lydney's friends, and Sarah would have known nothing about it. She's got herself into a devil of a scrape, no doubt; but I am her brother, and I intend to stand to her as far as I can.'

'Quite right,' rejoined Lydney. 'Then, as I don't think there's any time to spare, I'll write to my brother at once.'

'Better not do that, Mr. Lydney,' said the bookmaker—'at all events, until I've spoken to his friends. It's only delaying one post, but your brother has got securities on the

brain, that's what he's got; and any allusion to these lost papers sends him well-nigh off his head. Where he heard it from I don't know, but Captain Chives told me the other day that, at the time of the Dragon sale, somebody wrote your brother word that the papers were in one of the tables in the old ball-room. Well, he attended that sale; bought, I believe, every table in the house; he didn't find 'em——'

'Of course not,' said the other. 'I did, and took them away with me.'

'Now, who put them there?'

'I told you before I've not the slightest idea. I know no more how they came there than you do.'

'But,' said the bookmaker suddenly, 'you surely said the other day you knew who committed the robbery.'

'Yes, that I do—at all events, if the man himself is to be believed; he had no object to gain in admitting a crime to me that he had not committed. Goodness knows he had committed enough robberies and had done enough imprisonment for them without inventing one, but I don't believe he even knew there was such a place as the old Dragon.

'Do you mind letting me know who he was, and what was the story he told you?'

'He was a London burglar of the name of Creasey, and though he made some big hauls, could hardly be considered to have arrived at the top of his profession, inasmuch as he passed half his life in prison. He found me out, and as I was then engaged in the illicit business, and he knew it, I couldn't afford to quite turn my back on him just then; besides, as I say, he admitted that robbery, declared

he could put his hands on those securities at any moment, and that I should have them back again. He seemed to have taken a queer fancy to me, and insisted on joining in our business in an inferior capacity. I bore with him because I hoped to recover those papers; but he was a marked man with the police, and a clumsy beggar to boot, and wound up by bringing the excise officers about our ears, and our escaping only by the skin of our teeth. Shortly afterwards he was caught red-handed in his own more special occupation, and retired from public life for five years. When he came out the same thing took place again in every particular. While your father and I were engaged in that speculation at the Dragon, I heard he was once more out of prison. I only hoped that he would not discover me for a few months,

by which time the old inn would have been to let, myself abroad, and he again most likely in prison. That's all his story, as far as I'm concerned. Whenever he was out of prison he dogged me like a sleuth-hound, and a foreign shore was the only escape from his assumed devotion to myself. I have since thought he looked forward to making me the go-between in the realising of those securities, if he really could have laid his hands upon them.'

'And what became of him?' asked the other.

'He was killed in a railway accident, so I saw in the papers.'

'Reckon you're right,' said Sam. 'A cuss of that sort meant you to pay for his society in some shape. Now, Mr. Lydney, I'm going to wish you good-bye. You'll see

me to-morrow; and by that time I shall have just talked things over with your brother's friends, who will tell me whether it's best to write to him or to Miss Lydney. They will do it; but do it yourself as well, and then there will be no mistake about it. Now, once more, good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Richard Lydney, as he pressed Mercer's hand. 'Bear in mind there's no time to be lost. I should like to put things right before I go, and say good-bye to my brother.'

'He's right,' muttered Sam to himself as he descended the stairs. 'There is no time to be lost. It's getting very near the finish.'

The bookmaker lost no time in communicating with Chives, and that gentleman, who had previously talked the affair over with Hallaton, replied promptly, 'I've talked the

whole matter over again with Mr. Lydney's friends in consequence of what you told me, and pointed out that it would be necessary for either Mr. or Miss Lydney to come to town themselves, and they have no hesitation in saying that the communication had better be made to Miss Lydney. Her father's health is so precarious, and any allusion to the lost securities throws him into such a state of excitement, that the subject is strictly tabooed.'

Sam Mercer was thoroughly acquainted, through his friend Dr. Nicholl, with the banker's extraordinary conduct at the Dragon sale, but he knew, what nobody else did, that Mr. Lydney was summoned besides to say good-bye to that brother who had disappeared years ago, and over whose name the stigma of robbery still rested. It was absolutely necessary that he should come if he could, but that the excite-

ment would be probably considerably more than his friends expected was plain enough to Sam. Sam, in his profession, was accustomed to see men under a heavy strain of that kind, and knew very well that in the case of weak health it was dangerous.

'Hold on a bit, Captain Chives,' he said. 'I want to cypher this out. Miss Lydney is no doubt the person to write to. She will have a talk with her father's doctor before she starts. Will you deliver this message to her? Write it down; it's of consequence, and I've only my own judgment to go upon. Say it's of the greatest importance that Mr. Lydney should see the whole of those papers himself if it's in any way possible, but the interview will cause him great excitement. There's no objection to Miss Lydney being present, nor any medical man she chooses

within call; but it's of great consequence Mr. Lydney should see this man himself. 'There,' concluded the bookmaker as Chives finished writing, 'that's all I've got to say, except that the sooner they're in town the better, as it is a race between life and death, I'm afraid.'

Chives returned to his principal considerably impressed by Sam Mercer's warning, and Hallaton lost no time in writing to Mary, telling her to come as quickly as possible, and impressing upon her that after Dr. Meadows had read that message, if he gave permission, it was very desirable that Mr. Lydney should come too. If she would telegraph what accommodation she required he would see that rooms were ready for them.

Club-land at this time was in a state of much babble about the announcement of the case of 'Hallaton *versus* Hallaton,' and the

rumour—well founded, as we know—that Lady Hallaton and the missing Lady Wrensley were one and the same person—in short, that the Hallaton divorce case meant the explanation of the Wrensley mystery.

CHAPTER XLVI

AFTER THIRTY YEARS

MARY is quite prepared for her summons, and at once proceeds to consult Dr. Meadows with regard to her father. He has been considerably better and quieter the last few days, but the doctor shakes his head rather gravely at the idea of the proposed journey. He reads the message over again and again. He is completely Mary's confidant, and knows the whole story as far as she can tell it.

'No,' he said gravely, at length. 'I know all the particulars of the case, mind, and this message tells me more than you. I don't want to see that letter; it would not help me

if I did. It is quite probable the writer doesn't in the least understand the meaning of the message he has been earnestly bid to send.'

'I can't say for certain,' replied Mary, 'but suppose it comes from one of the Mercers, either the father or the son.'

'The son, I should think, from the wording of it,' replied Dr. Meadows. 'The sender of that message, when he talks of your father having great excitement to bear, and taking the advice of his medical man before risking the journey, had "heart" in his mind. Your father, I'm glad to say, has no organic disease whatever. It is his head I am always afraid of. He's tolerably well just now, and if I am right in the vague idea that has come into my mind, I think he ought to risk this interview. It may upset him a bit for a time, but as soon as he has quieted down he'll be a

better and a happier man, in my judgment, than he has been since his misfortunes.'

So it was decided that Mr. Lydney was to undertake the journey. Mary telegraphed to Hallaton to secure them rooms, and the next afternoon saw them comfortably installed at a quiet hotel in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park.

The banker had at first been extremely puzzled as to the cause of this journey to town, but Dr. Meadows had declared that it was necessary Miss Lydney should see a London physician of his recommending. He did not believe there was anything the matter, but for his own satisfaction he preferred to have a second opinion. Mary was rather amused at finding that she was to play the part of an invalid, and that her father was supposed to be going up to

town in charge of her. Dr. Meadows saw them off by the train, and as he shook hands with Mary said, 'Don't be afraid, my dear young lady; you will bring back the lost papers, and have their whole history cleared up with a vengeance, or I'm much mistaken.'

At the hotel Mary found a letter from Hallaton awaiting her, in which he informed her that a carriage would call for them at eleven o'clock the next morning, and that she and her father had better drive out to the address mentioned below, and ask for Mr. Brent; that the papers would be there restored to her, and that he trusted Mr. Lydney would not be over-excited by the transaction. Mary duly followed the directions contained in her letter, and, accompanied by her father, stepped into the

carriage which arrived for them next morning, and drove off to Mr. Brent's. The door was opened for them by Sam Mercer, who, touching his hat to Mr. Lydney, said, 'I beg your pardon, sir; neither you nor Miss Lydney know me, though I know you by sight. My name is Sam Mercer. The gentleman who has unexpectedly come into possession of some of your property is upstairs waiting to restore it. I have only to say that I've nothing more to do with it, but shall be waiting here in case I'm wanted. Show the lady and gentleman right up, Susan.'

The banker trembled from head to foot; he said nothing, looked merely for a moment at Sam, and then followed their conductress upstairs. As they entered the room the occupant half rose from the sofa, and said,

'Pray be seated. I am too ill to get up and welcome you; but I have much to say to you, and very little time to say it.'

A mazed look came over Mr. Lydney's face, as that of a man troubled with some recollection of former years, and he gazed earnestly at the speaker.

'John, don't you know me? Years have changed me, and illness still more so, but still you might recollect your only brother.'

'Good heavens, Richard!' exclaimed the banker, and in a moment he had started to his feet, and was clasping his brother's hand affectionately, while his memory travelled back to years, years ago, when he was a young man just taken into the bank, and Richard a boy at school, and his mother's spoilt darling.

For some moments not a word was spoken; both men were evidently deeply moved, while Mary was so bewildered that she forgot for the minute to fear the excitement for her father. She had no idea that he had ever had a brother, and yet that wasted wreck stretched upon the sofa, and clasping his hand, he had just acknowledged to be such. She had known that the robbery at the bank had been attributed to a relation, but she had never dreamt of its being one so near akin. It was Richard Lydney who first broke the silence.

'I have sent for you, John,' he said at last, in a low voice, 'to say "Good-bye," and to give you the word of a dying man that I am innocent of the crime laid to my charge. The securities I was falsely accused of stealing fell quite accidentally into my

hands only a year ago. It is rather a long story, but I should like you to know it. It is the story of a wasted life, now drawing to its close.' And then Richard Lydney recapitulated the history of his adventures from the day he had fled from Exmouth up to the present time—'and there,' he concluded, 'are those long-lost securities, the cause, John, of all your misfortunes, and the which I once more solemnly declare I never took away with me;' and as he spoke he pointed to the table on which lay a bundle of papers. The banker had sat literally trembling with excitement during his brother's narration, and, absorbed though she had been in it, Mary had by this time recovered her self-possession, and was keeping a watchful eye upon her father.

As Richard Lydney finished, the banker

sprang to his feet, and exclaimed, 'And you found them in a drawer of one of the tables in the old ball-room? Extraordinary! Only just before the sale a poor fellow of the name of Johnson sent me a line from the hospital at Ditchford to say that they were there.'

'Sit down, papa,' said Mary, 'and try not to excite yourself more than you can help. Excitement is so bad for him, Uncle Richard, and I am afraid it is equally bad for yourself.'

'So you are my niece Mary,' said Richard Lydney. 'I have thought much of you, and have seen you on more than one occasion in Exmouth.'

'I think you had better stop speaking for a few minutes. It will be best for both of you.' But despite his daughter's exhortations the banker was far too excited about his brother's strange story to compose himself.

'Ah, Mary,' he exclaimed, in tones of anguish, 'if I hadn't lost my head just when I wanted it, if we had only searched the tables thoroughly, Lydney and Son need never have stopped payment.'

'Be quiet, papa, please. I'm sure you will, when I say it's bad for Uncle Richard.'

'Yes, keep as quiet as you can, John. The papers are all right, and there's no more to tell.'

'May I ask one question?' said Mary. 'How came you to discover the secret hiding-place in that table?'

'I know of no hiding-place,' rejoined her uncle. 'I found the papers, as I have said, in a drawer. It was not locked, and precisely like the drawer of any ordinary writing-table. But, John, I also have one question to ask. You say that a man of the name of Johnson

sent you that message from the Ditchford Hospital. There was a man I've known for many years, no very reputable character, and therefore quite as likely to be travelling under the name of Johnson as not, who always assured me that he stole the papers, and knew where they were. However, he was killed in a railway accident, I believe, and certainly never confided the secret to me.'

'It's the same man; it must be the same man!' exclaimed the banker, excitedly. 'Called himself Johnson—and, God help me, Dick, I went up to Ditchford expecting to see you, only to find—a dead man whom I had never seen before. In my anxiety to get some clue to the missing deeds, I telegraphed for an officer from Scotland Yard, who identified him as a well-known burglar, Creasey by name.'

'Then the scoundrel spoke the truth after all. I should like to have heard his version of the business.'

'He left a long letter with the chaplain—a confession, I suppose I might say, since it was upon that ground that the reverend gentleman refused to give it up to any one except the person to whom it was addressed: 'Richard Brent, Esq.' That's you, Dick, you know.'

'Yes,' replied the other. 'I'm curious to see that confession. It's a whim of mine. Mary, get a pen and ink, and just write a letter I'll dictate to you.'

At her uncle's dictation Mary penned a letter to the chaplain of the Ditchford Hospital, requesting him to give the bearer the confession addressed to Richard Brent, *alias* Richard Lydney, as testimony to the innocence of a dying man who wished to clear

himself of a crime of which he had been wrongfully accused.

This letter Richard signed, and made Mary witness, and then said, 'Take the deeds, John; you will find them all right. I am too tired to talk more now; and I daresay you'll be all the better for lying down a bit yourself. Come and see me to-morrow, if you're well enough. At all events, Mary, I shall expect you. Leave me that note, and as you go downstairs ask them to tell Sam Mercer to come up and see me.'

They bid the sick man good-bye, and as they descended the stairs Sam came from a lower room into the hall. Mary gave her message, and as soon as Sam had seen them into their carriage, he turned back into the house and went up into Richard Lydney's room.

'Time the visit was over,' said the bookmaker, gently. 'Tell me what it is you want, and I'll do it, no fear, and then get some rest.'

Richard told him to read the letter and close it. 'Now,' he said, when the bookmaker had finished, 'I want you to go down to Ditchford with that letter by the earliest train, and to bring that confession back with you.'

'One word,' said Sam. 'You've trusted me all through this business, and found me ever honest. You'd better let me hand this over to Captain Chives—the chaplain will pay more attention to an officer in the army than he would to me. Clergymen of the Church of England don't think much of my calling.'

'Do as you think best; but remember I rely upon you.'

'And you may,' said the bookmaker, and dashing down the stairs he jumped into the cab which he had kept waiting in case of contingencies, and drove West as fast as, stimulated by the promise of an extra guerdon, the driver could take him.

He was fortunate enough to catch Chives just thinking of lunch, and no sooner did that gentleman awake to a sense of what was required of him than he was prompt in the extreme. An 'A B C' was sent for, consulted, and the very next train saw the artilleryman on his way to Ditchford.

CHAPTER XLVII

CREASEY'S CONFESSION

ALTHOUGH Mr. Lydney had been greatly excited at finding that his brother was still alive, yet the recovery of the precious securities had so soothing an effect upon his mind that he did not suffer so much as it was feared he might. Mary was very anxious about him, but towards the evening he became more tranquil, and after passing a tolerably good night professed himself not only able, but anxious, to accompany his daughter to Islington.

'Poor Dick!' he said. 'What a miserable mistake his life has all been, and how

little we have seen of each other! I suppose, poor fellow, I ought to have looked after him better, I was so many years his senior; but I was only just married, and I had no idea he was going to the bad. If he had only confided his troubles to me! As for his debts, no doubt they were such as I could easily have arranged. And as for his being entangled with Miss Windsor, he might have gone away just as easily with our knowledge instead of without it. If he had only had the sense to come back at once and declare his innocence of the robbery all would have been well; but he hadn't the courage to face it. Poor Dick! Ah, it'll all matter little to him in a few weeks now!'

Mary made no answer. She was wondering in her own mind whether the note she had written for her uncle yesterday had been

successful, and whether the story of the missing papers from the time they left the safe in Exmouth to their discovery by her uncle in the ball-room of the Dragon was likely to be unravelled.

Chives had accomplished his errand successfully, after some slight demur on the part of the chaplain of the Ditchford Hospital. Producing Richard Lydney's note, he had at once unfolded his mission. The chaplain read the letter carefully, and, having done that, remarked:

'This is your card, of course, Captain Chives? May I ask if you are acquainted with the writer of this note?'

'I neither know him nor its contents,' was the rejoinder. 'I was told that you were unwilling to part with the letter I am commissioned to bring back with me unless

perfectly assured that it would fall into the hands of the man for whom it was intended. I was further told that that man was on his death-bed, and excessively anxious to have this letter. It was thought that my status as an officer in the army would be a guarantee to you that this application was *bonâ fide*, and I am quite willing to answer for the honesty of those who sent me. Further, I was told to say that if you will insist on delivering it with your own hands, it will do equally well, providing you are prepared to return with me to London by the next train.'

'Do you know Mr. Lydney, the banker of Exmouth?' inquired the chaplain.

'Certainly,' replied Chives.

'And Richard Lydney?'

'Never heard of him,' was the response.

'I should like to place this letter in the

hands for which it was intended myself; but it would be extremely inconvenient for me to go to town to-night, and, therefore, Captain Chives, I must entrust it to you. If you'll wait a couple of minutes I'll fetch it.'

This the reverend gentleman accordingly did, and in less than an hour Chives was speeding back to town with the letter in his breast-pocket. Through the medium of Sam Mercer, Creasey's confession was speedily transferred to the house at Islington, and when Richard Lydney welcomed his brother and niece the next morning, he held the paper in his hand.

'I know, John, you believed my story yesterday; but it is a satisfaction to me to place a thorough confirmation of it in your hands. Read it.'

There were a few lines at the commence-

ment to the effect that it had been written down by the chaplain at the earnest request of James Creasey, a criminal, dying at Ditchford Hospital from injuries received in a railway accident. 'I have thought proper,' added the reverend gentleman, 'to clothe his confession in my own language, in preference to the mixture of *argot* and unconscious profanity in which it was couched':—

'It is not worth saying much about myself, but I was a regular gutter-bred one, I was. Such as us haven't much of a chance in this world, and I wasn't the sort to break my heart in trying to get an honest living. I was pretty clever at pocket-picking as a child, and by the time I was twenty had begun to make a name for myself as a burglar.'

(There was a note by the chaplain. 'N.B.—The miserable man seemed really to look back

with pride upon his reputation.') 'Well, I have broken into a many houses, and been into a many gaols; like others, our profession has its ups and downs. But what I am coming to is this. By the time I was about thirty years of age I had made things a little too hot for myself to make London and its neighbourhood pleasant as a residence, and determined to make a little business tour in the provinces, and after a bit found myself at Exmouth. There was a quiet inn about a mile from the town at which I put up. It had been a swell place, I fancy, in its day, but it was on the down line when I knew it; been a big house of call, I heard, in the old smuggling days. However, it was a nice quiet house, with no inquisitive people about, and I thought I'd make it my headquarters for a bit, and see what was to be done in the neighbourhood.

Well, they were pretty old-fashioned in their habits down there, and so were their locks and fastenings, when they happened to recollect to use 'em. Getting into a house down there, for a swell London cracksman such as I was by that time, was child's play, and I drove a very pretty trade. But people will talk, and after a little they raised such a hullabaloo about my visits that I determined to finish off with a very likely crib that I had marked down, and then quit the locality. I had worked the oracle, made a very good haul indeed, and was returning home through Exmouth in the early morning when I saw a young gentleman open the door of a house in the main street, look cautiously up and down, then come out, and with a bag in his hand walk quickly past me in the direction of the railway station. I had a good look at his

face, for I was wondering at first whether he was in my own line, but no, he looked rather too much of a gentleman for that. I walked on, and as I passed the door that he had come out of, a little to my astonishment I saw that it belonged to the Bank, and that he had left it ajar. Encouraged by my success, I determined, at all events, to have a look in. There was nobody about. I slipped on india-rubber overshoes, stepped inside the hall, put down my bag of plunder, and began to explore. I had not to go far before my practised eye discovered what I wanted—the safe. It was locked, of course, but the lock was of the old provincial pattern, and what was that to a top-sawyer like me, with the latest improvements in jimmies and skeleton keys in my pocket? There was risk, of course. I didn't know who slept on the premises. I

didn't know whether that door was left open by accident or design—in the latter case that young man might return. I resolved to chance it, and in less than fifteen minutes I was inside that safe. As far as gold went there was not a great deal, and I wasn't quite such a fool as to take the notes of a country bank. But there were a lot of deeds and such like, and for the return of these there is sometimes a big reward advertised and no questions asked; so a bundle of these I took, and then walked home to my quarters at the Dragon.

'The next day there was no end of a bobbery all over the place; if my previous exploits had interested the public, the robbery at the Bank had excited it to fever pitch. I soon found that to leave my present quarters would be to at once attract attention. Quiet

though the people were, and indifferent to the proceedings of their lodgers, yet the recent robberies were being discussed at the bar and in the tap-room by the few customers who chanced to drop in. Most of my plunder I had already got away to town, especially such as was compromising. The most condemning things I had got about me were the papers I had taken from the bank. I was desperately afraid of being caught with them upon me. Nobody ever went into the old ball-room, and I resolved to hide them there in the drawer of an old table, and come back for them when the storm had blown over. In a few days I left, but was shortly after convicted of a robbery near London, for which I got five years' imprisonment. I have been in gaol half my life, and when I was out somehow I never seemed to have time to go down and

fetch those papers; in fact, I don't think I should have bothered my head any more about them, only that they gave me a sort of hold over Brent, as he called himself, although I knew his real name to be Richard Lydney. I don't know how it was; I don't think he cared about me, but I had a curious fancy for him. He had had a robbery chalked down to him, you see, which I committed, and though he hadn't been "shopped" for it, still he had had to pay for it in his way. Last time I came out of prison I inquired about Brent, and for a long time couldn't make out what had become of him. At last I heard he was in the country down Devonshire way. I'd got a bit of money, so I thought I'd tog myself out respectable, and go down to Exmouth. There might be a bit of business to be done there; it might be that Brent had gone down

there—scenes of his childhood, and all that sort of thing—and I might find out if those papers were still where I had put them. If I found 'em and Brent, I determined this time he should have them right off. Well, I got down there, found the old Dragon Inn was still going, and was thinking about taking up my quarters there, when I was unluckily got hold of by an inquisitive old fool, who I soon found knew the people who kept it, and was a daily visitor there. While I was thinking how to shake him off came the explosion, and I found Brent had been carrying on his old game again. Under pretence of curiosity to see the place, I did my best to search the old ball-room, but the excise officers kept too jealous a watch, and, though allowed to see the house and the illicit still, I never was left a moment alone. Leaving Exmouth, I got my

gruel. The doctor tells me it's all up with me, and I can't live—and that's all I know about the papers, so help me heaven.

'I have sent word to Mr. Lydney, the banker, of Exmouth, and I wish this paper to be given to Richard Lydney, *alias* Brent, if ever he makes inquiries about his old pal, James Creasey, *alias* Johnson.'

The whole tale of the lost securities was now perfectly clear, and it was singular to reflect that if it had not been for the insatiable curiosity of the meddlesome Tootell those long-lost papers would have found their way back to Mr. Lydney's hands in time to save the bank of Lydney & Co.

CONCLUSION

The case of 'Hallaton *versus* Hallaton' comes into court at last, and if the scandal-mongers expected piquant revelations, they were sadly disappointed. As Audley South said, 'Lady Wrensley was as great a fraud in the law courts as she had been in society.' Talk about an interesting trial, it was nothing but a most prosaic and everyday case of bigamy, rendered more so by the absence of the principal actors in the drama, with the exception of Sir Frederick Hallaton. The proceedings were of the baldest and briefest; there was no defence. It was proved in the most conclusive way that Sarah had no pretence whatever for supposing her husband to be dead,

and that application to his lawyers would have at once assured her she was mistaken, even had she thought so, while Sir William's solicitors, instructed by their client, produced proof of the second bigamous marriage. The decision of the Court promised Sir Frederick his freedom as soon as the six months' delay imposed by law had expired.

Mary wrote a long description of the recovery of the papers to her old friend, Dr. Meadows, and informed him that she and her father would remain in town some little time longer, as it was impossible to leave her uncle Richard, who was rapidly sinking. Though she had never heard of this relation, her father told her that Dr. Meadows would remember him and all the circumstances of his disappearance. As for Sir Frederick, she had seen nothing of him since she had been in London, though the papers had informed her

of the results of 'Hallaton *versus* Hallaton.' It would make little difference to her, she thought, but she was glad that he was released from that infamous woman.

Their stay in London, however, soon came to an end, and in three weeks Richard Lydney had closed his misguided career, and was laid quietly in his grave, with his brother, niece, and Sam Mercer as mourners. He left, to the banker's surprise, some seven or eight thousand pounds behind him, all of which, with the exception of a handsome legacy to Sam Mercer, was bequeathed to Mary. The last sad duties performed, Mr. Lydney was anxious to hurry back to Exmouth with the precious papers, and re-establish himself in the eyes of all his friends and acquaintances. Just before leaving town Mary got a note from Sir Frederick, in which he congratulated her on the satisfactory result of her visit to London,

further informed her that he was going abroad for some time, and begged her not to forget what he had said the last time he saw her.

. . . . . .

Wandering up and down on the Continent, well known in the Riviera, and notably as a daring and successful player at Monte Carlo, is a bold, handsome woman, always strikingly dressed, and who attracts much attention whenever she appears. She is generally surrounded by a train of admirers; but ladies, though inquisitive as to whom she may be, and unable to refrain from admiration of her insolent beauty and magnificent toilettes, manifest no desire to make her acquaintance. It is whispered that she is a woman with a history, and certain it is that those few of her own sex she consorts with can also lay claim to that somewhat dubious distinction.

Rumour says that she was once a star in the London world, and is now one of those lost Pleiades upon whom society has closed the gates of Paradise. Although amply provided for—Sir William behaved to the guilty woman with chivalrous liberality—Sarah, or Madame Mercier, as she now calls herself, is always in sore straits for money. She has contracted habits of unbridled extravagance, and to be numbered among the train of her admirers is a heavy tax upon any man not posssessed of liberal resources. Lover she has none; except for that passing caprice for Fred Hallaton, Sarah has never known what it is to feel a *tendresse* for any man. A coquette to the tips of her fingers, she is a very adept in the taxation of those who succumb to her fascinations. As one who had worn her chains for a season remarked on recovering

his freedom, 'She is a charming, but devilish expensive acquaintance.'

Still Sarah, stiff upper lip as she might keep to the world, felt her downfall bitterly. There were women she encountered at times whom she had either snubbed or patronised in her days of splendour, who avenged the slights of former times, and passed her with stony stare or contemptuous smile. Such episodes stung her haughty temper to madness. Restlessly she moved from place to place, seeking, like the fabled wanderer, that peace which in this world she would never attain. Quiet seclusion had no attraction for Sarah. She craved excitement: society was a necessity for her; and yet the averted looks of the women and the bold homage of the men were gall and wormwood to her. Play! Yes, Monaco gave zest to life; but, fortunate

as one may be at starting, the persistent gambler invariably finds the tables too much for him in the end, and what would be a comfortable income for any one indulging persistently in *rouge et noir* defies calculation. It was after a very bad week at Monaco that Sarah came to the conclusion that life was becoming very stale and unprofitable. She was a fool; she had lost every shilling she could lay her hands on. Stay; she had some valuable jewellery as yet—little difficulty about realising that in the last legitimate home of *rouge et noir* and *roulette*. She would have one last night at the tables and recoup herself. The stimulant had become a necessity to her, and, sad to say, other stimulants as well. Never had she played bolder or with worse luck than she did that evening. It was soon over, and with a saucy smile, a gay laugh, and a

declaration that she was utterly ruined, she accepted the invitation of one of her admirers to supper. Never had she appeared in wilder spirits than she did at that repast; and when her cavalier bade her good night on the steps of her hotel, he little dreamt that it was good night for aye, for ever.

Sarah Mercer was found the next morning apparently asleep in an armchair in the sitting-room; but the empty phial with the smell of chloral still clasped in the stiffened fingers told the last scene of that pitiful life. Two years after her flight from London, and Sarah's restless spirit was at peace.

Mr. Lydney's old friends rallied strongly around him on his return to Exmouth. Dr. Meadows proclaimed the whole story far and wide; and although the bank was never reopened, all its liabilities were discharged, and

the banker himself satisfactorily acquitted of intentional fraud.

As for Mary, hard though Sir Frederick pleaded, she resolutely declined to become his wife while Sarah lived. 'It may be a foolish prejudice, my darling. I cannot help it. I should never feel married to you while that woman lived. I shall never marry any one else; but Fred, dear, don't think that I have any wish to hold you bound to me. You will be my own love as long as I live. You will find other girls who will laugh at my foolish fancies, and God grant you may be happy with one of them.'

However, Sir Frederick did not come across that young lady whom Mary had suggested might fill her place before Sarah's unexpected death effectually removed all Miss Lydney's objections.

Colonel Chives, though a frequent guest at Oaklands, still visits there unaccompanied. He delivered himself one night in the smoking-room as follows: 'I have lived a virtuous and prosperous life, have had a deal of fun in my time, unclouded by domestic afflictions, except in the case of the lamented decease of Fuss and Fidget; and except when, in spite of old Sam's counsels, the "racing flies up and hits me in the eye"' (meaning 'proves unsuccessful' in Chives' vernacular), 'have nothing to complain of; nor upon the whole, Master Fred, have you.'

'No, indeed, Dicky,' was the reply; 'I'm a very much more fortunate man than I deserve to be.'

THE END.

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